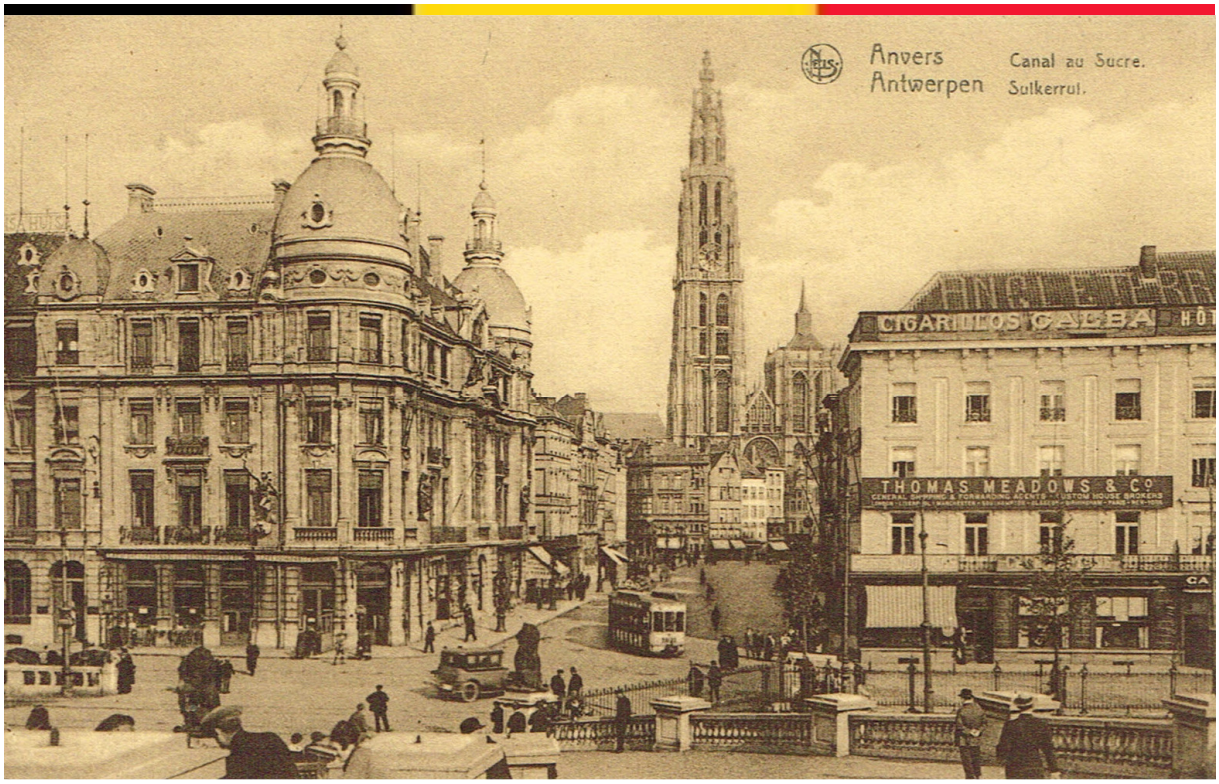
3. Antwerp… and then some



Antwerp is definitely worth a visit. Most touring companies will drop you here for a whole day but I recommend a quick visit to the city and spending the rest of the day in the Antwerp harbour and the village of Doel.

The following paragraphs describe a short city walk through the historic city centre of Antwerp.
If you've come by car, it's best to park on the left bank ("linkeroever") near the Frederik Van Eedenplein, and start your walk from there. Set your sat nav for Van Eedenplein, Antwerp. Parking on the Van Eedenplein and in most of the streets in this area is free – sometimes it depends on which side of the street you park. When in doubt, ask a passer-by. After the walk you can take the metro back to the place where your car is parked. If you've come by train (Central Station), you should first take some time to admire the station building, which is considered the fourth most beautiful train station in the world, and quite rightfully so. Then take the metro (line 3 or 15) to Frederik Van Eeden. Make sure you ring the bell to make the conductor stop – ring right after the Groenplaats stop.

The city walk

From the Van Eedenplein, walk into the little park stretching along the river Scheldt. You'll have a stunning view on Antwerp's most beautiful side. There's an orientation table to tell you which building is which – you'll come across it while *walking towards the strange square building leading to the pedestrian tunnel under the river. Enter the building and enjoy the smell and sight of the magnificent wooden escalators. If the escalators aren't working, if you're in a wheelchair, or if you're pushing a pram, you can choose to take the elevator. Walk through the tunnel and you'll find yourself on the right bank about 600m further;* on the pretty Sint-Jansvliet. On Sundays there's a flea market, where you may buy a couple of beer glasses or some old postcards of Antwerp.
Leave the building and turn around facing the Scheldt river. The hangars that used to be full of goods discharged from moored ships are now used as a car park. *Turn right and walk to the castle Het Steen*. This castle houses a maritime museum. In front of the castle you

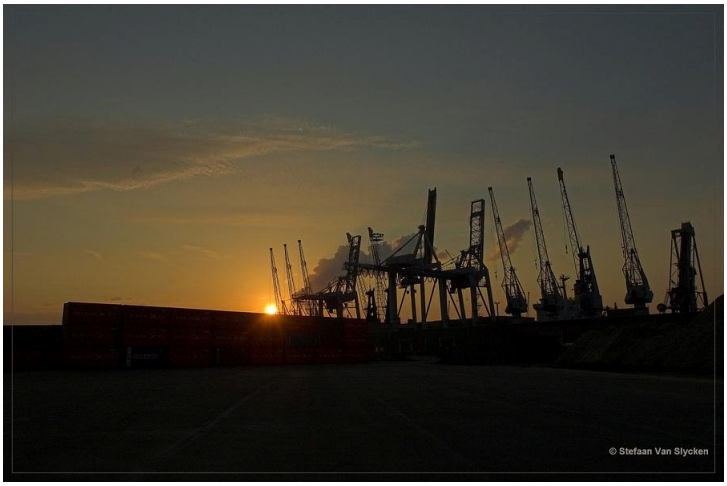
will see a statue of *Lange Wapper*, a legendary character from old folk tales.
Turn right just opposite the castle and walk into a street called Repenstraat. This street leads you to the Vleeshuis ('Meat House'), which now functions as a museum on "music in the city". Built in 1501, it used to be the butchers' guild house. *Walk past it and turn right, left and then right again. You'll end up on the market square, the Grote Markt.* The city hall and the Brabo fountain are the most impressive sights, but make sure you look at all the wonderful old houses.
The statue on the fountain depicts Brabo, the protagonist of an old folk tale. It was said that in Roman times there was a giant named Antigoon who chopped off the hands of sailors refusing to pay toll on the Scheldt. Brabo killed the giant, chopped his right hand off and threw it in the Scheldt. It is said – although research now proves otherwise – that the name "Antwerpen" was derived from "handwerpen", meaning "throwing the hand".
Facing the city hall, cross the road on your left – pay attention before crossing, this road can be surprisingly busy – and walk into the street leading forward from there, the Hoogstraat. This street contains quite a few funny and original shops. *Keep an eye open for the entrance gate to the Vlaaikensgang on the left side. It almost looks like private territory but it is in fact a street dating from the 1500s. Walk straight to the end, turn left and almost immediately right to get to the cathedral.* You may enter if you like, but a thorough visit is only possible during certain hours and includes paying an entrance fee.
Pass the cathedral on the right side and walk to the Groenplaats ('Green Place'). You'll pass quite a few pizzerias and some very authentic bars. The Groenplaats is the ideal place to view the old surrounding buildings while enjoying breakfast, lunch or dinner. After filling your stomach or otherwise, *walk towards the Hilton hotel and continue straight through. You'll end up in an uninteresting but short street that takes a turn to the right. Turn left at the end and cross the street when the lights eventually turn green.* Now you're facing the Meir, the shopping street of Antwerp. On Sundays it's virtually deserted giving you more of a chance to look above the shop signs and appreciate the architecture. *Stroll along until you can take the street Wapper on your right.* The house where Rubens used to live is located here and functions now as a very interesting museum. It holds some paintings of Rubens and his students, and the building itself is a fine example of a rich man's house in the 1600s. *Continue walking along Wapper, cross the intersection and behold the city theatre, a very modern structure, right in front of you.*
Now go back to the Meir to continue your walk. At the end of the Meir you should keep going straight at the intersection, the Leysstraat. Keep following this street – the name changes to De Keyserlei as you pass the Antwerp Opera building on your left. The Central Station now comes into view. Before you enter it, turn right to see all the jewellers' stores, and turn back and walk past the station to take a peek at the Astridplein, with the entrance to the Zoo and the Elisabeth concert hall. The diamond museum is on this square too.
Finally, enter the Central Station and look around at its majestic architecture. It was built between 1899 and 1905. Newsweek voted it the fourth most beautiful station in the world. Recently it was expanded to facilitate high-speed trains.
If you've parked your car on the left bank, you can take the metro back to the Van Eedenplein (lines 3 or 15 towards Linkeroever). The metro station is right outside the train station. Make sure to ring the bell just after the Groenplaats stop.

If you're into modern architecture, a stop at the Bolivarplaats is worthwile. It's best to take public transportation. See the new Palace of Justice. Individual visits inside are not possible unless you kill somebody.

A drive through the Antwerp harbour

If you've come by car or rented a bicycle, I suggest a ride through the Antwerp harbour. A word of warning: this is a man's thing. Huge, smelly, noisy and ugly buildings and machines are often man's things. So leave the missus on the Meir for shopping and go for a ride.
The following route is about 40 km long so it can also be done by bicycle in an hour or two, not counting food, drink, or photo stops. These stops included, I'd say you'll do it in two hours by car or four hours by bike. It's about half of the Havenroute, which is (sometimes) indicated by hexagonal signs.

The route starts at the Steen castle, or you can set the sat-nav to *Kattendijkbrug*. The first docks you pass are the Bonapartedok and Kattendijkdok, some of the oldest in the harbour still existing. They date from the 1860s. *Keep following the main road*. Depending on which bridges are open, 'Omlegging' (or 'diversion')-signs will guide you. *Keep to the right and follow the Oosterweelsteenweg. Take the first right and then turn left to the Kastelweg*. On the corner of the Kastelweg and the Oosterweelsteenweg you'll see some trees with a church tower sticking out. It's worth a stop. This is the church of the village Oosterweel, which was demolished in the 1960s. Sand from the docks was used to heighten the rest of the grounds but this church remained at the original ground level.



Harbour installations at sunset

Follow the Kastelweg along refineries for Total-Fina and Esso. These factories look like they're from another planet. It's noteworthy that most raw oil is not delivered to Antwerp by ship – the tanker ships you may see are used for taking refined products away. Since 1971 raw oil is delivered to Rotterdam and a pipeline delivers 23 million tonnes of oil a year to Antwerp. *You reach the Scheldelaan when you turn right at the next intersection*.
If you wish, take the next street on your right, the Polderdijkweg. You may skip this little detour if you like. Near nr 405 you'll find the restaurant "Spek & Eieren" ("Bacon & Eggs"). Harbour personnel used to eat there, and at noon there'd always be bacon and eggs. It was also used in the tv series 'Terug Naar Oosterdonk' ('Back to Oosterdonk') – a series about polder villages that are demolished for the extension of the harbour. The restaurant was closed in 2002, reopened in 2006 but apparently it's closed again, so I can't confirm whether you'll be able to eat there... but there are better places to eat nearby, believe it or not. Keep following the Polderdijkweg until you reach the open bridge (Petroleumbrug). On the right you can see the Hansadok which was dug in 1928. Anyhow, apart from this (and some railroad tracks and more refineries) there's little to see here. The petrol bridge won't close so you'll have *to turn back and then turn right again on the Scheldelaan*.

Continue along the Scheldelaan. Just before you cross one of the bridges of the Van Cauwelaertlock and Boudewijnlock, you see some red houses on your right hand side. In time, these will all disappear to make way for more petrol tanks. Most of them are still inhabited.

Keep following the Scheldelaan until you see directions for Lillo. Lillo is another village that was destroyed for the extension of the harbour. The only thing that's left of Lillo is the old mill, which you will pass first. The mill (named "the unicorn") was built in 1735 and moved here in 1966. An extensive restoration

was finished in 2008. The mill is active on special occasions. Feel free to go inside if the door is open or if the vanes are turning.

But now off to Lillo, which is located on your left side. This picturesque village surrounded by the industrial building blocks of the harbour is quite a bizarre sight. Lillo used to be a military fortress but civilians lived there as well. Because it was military, the city of Antwerp couldn't demolish it. The old army barracks are now apartments, and some of the interior decorations in the church were taken from churches of the demolished polder villages. The town hall was transformed into an interesting museum and there are a couple of good restaurants and bars to be found. If you just want a quick snack, the café in the little yacht harbour, which runs dry during low tide, has excellent "croque monsieur" (toasted ham and cheese sandwich) and soup at very reasonable prices.

From Easter until the end of September you can take the ferry from Lillo to Doel once every hour. Just make sure you return in time to fetch the last ferry back to Lillo. You can read about Doel further on.

Now *leave Lillo and drive back a bit*. Past the mill you'll see *directions towards the A12 highway, so turn left on the 3rd big intersection*. You'll *drive through the Tijsmanstunnel*. Pay attention not to take the wrong way here because then you'll end up in the Liefkenshoektunnel, which is a toll tunnel – the only place where you have to pay toll in Belgium, because the Government was out of money at the time of construction. *If you've come by bicycle, the Tijsmanstunnel is forbidden as it's part of a motorway. In this case you also turn left on that 3rd intersection but you keep to the right twice . You'll reach the magnificent Lillo bridge. If the bridge is drawn you should ring the control tower using the communication box. Guards will then lower part of the bridge but they only do this for cyclists as cars can easily take the tunnel.*

Take the first exit and turn left at the end of the road. *For cyclists: follow the bridge road until you reach crossroads. Turn left and follow the road to the next crossroads where you turn left again*. You're on *the Noorderlaan*. On the right you pass the church ship ("kerkschip"). This ship was – believe it or not – built by the Nazis. It's made of concrete and weighs 3,800 tonnes. Hitler planned to use ships like these as bunkers in the ocean, both to protect and supply submarines. This ship was built in Holland by a French company. In the beginning of 1944 it was transferred to Antwerp for the interior installations but when the city was liberated in September 1944, the ship was sold to a private company. It proved too unpractical for cargo shipping and in 1950 it was sold to the archdiocese Mechelen. It consists of two chapels, a museum, and a bar, and it can be visited during opening hours. See http://www.kerkschip-antwerpen.be.

Further on, you'll see the Antwerp North ranging station with its strange buildings. This can't be visited except on special days. On the right you see the former GM plant (General Motors or Opel). After a lot of political games and strikes, it was closed at the end of 2010. The future of these buildings is yet unsure. All the machinery was sold.

Wilmarsdonk before ...

... and during demolition (source: Wikipedia)

When you've passed the dock (Churchilldock) you should turn right at the second intersection, Treurenborg. Turn right again. At the end you turn right into the Wilmarsstraat. About halfway this street you'll see a lonely church tower amidst containers on your left side. You can drive up to it. This is the church tower of Wilmarsdonk, another demolished polder village. From what I've read there were plans to move this tower to another village to build a church there. However, this proved quite impractical and too expensive so the tower stayed where it was.
Continue along the Wilmarsstraat and turn left (Westeind). Turn left again at the next intersection (Zomerweg) and keep following the road until you get back to the Noorderlaan.
From here on, you can set the sat-nav to your hotel or youth hostel. You'll follow the Noorderlaan further on, and you can then either go to the A12 motorway or keep going straight until you'll reach Antwerp's city centre again.

Top tip: the sight of the harbour at night is quite impressive. All the chemical plants and the bridges are lit like Christmas trees. You can either stay a little longer this side of the harbour, or go to Doel later on. There are harbour installations on the left bank of the Scheldt as well, and you get a great view from the dyke of Doel.

The ghost town of Doel – a tale of political indecision

You won't find Doel in any tourist guide. It's not one of Belgium's proudest tales either. This polder village of about 1,300 people (in the 1970s) has to disappear because of the extension of the harbour on the left bank of the Scheldt. The number of inhabitants has fallen drastically, and those that chose to stay are pawns in a political and judicial game.

Unlike Wilmarsdonk, Lillo, Oorderen and Oosterweel, which were disowned and demolished in a couple of years without much ado, the doom of Doel has been pending since the 1960s. In the planning for the extension of the harbour it was suggested that Doel would have to disappear – as far back as in 1963. In 1968 a building prohibition was enforced, but this was removed in 1978, when it was decided the harbour wouldn't reach Doel.
Soon after, construction of the Nuclear power plant started, and it's still active today.
The Doeldok is located at the south of Doel. It was dug in the 1980s, because it was predicted the oil industry would need another dock. The walls are not straight as in most docks, but they are inclined to facilitate discharging ships with pipelines. Unfortunately, the major expansion of oil industry never happened and because of the inclined walls the dock is unsuitable for other ships. It was never officially opened. So the dock has remained unused – apart from some water recreation – but later on the responsible politicians declared it was "also" dug because the sand was needed elsewhere in the harbour. The media estimated the costs between €50 million and €175 million. Nowadays, the dock is being filled with sand again, coming from the new docks that are being dug around Doel.
Halfway through the 1990s there were new extension plans for the harbour. Two huge new docks were planned, and the question was raised whether Doel would remain inhabitable. Because of political indecision and judicial errors the digging of the Deurganckdock was delayed and the situation of Doel remained questionable. Some of the inhabitants just wanted their houses to be bought by the government so they could start elsewhere, others wanted to stay. There was a massive public outcry and it was obvious that people wouldn't just agree and leave "because it was decided so". The works at the Deurganckdock were halted by a court decision, but the Flemish Government voted a law bypassing this decision. The Deurganckdock was finished in 2005.
Now there are plans for the construction of the Saeftinghedock, which will run straight through the village. Because of the economical crisis and other factors, it isn't really clear whether this dock will ever be built.

Don't look for this hotel, it's already demolished

As for the inhabitants of Doel, many left because of the uncertainty. In 1999 it was decided that people could voluntarily sell their houses to the company that oversees the digging of the docks. People could choose to have the option to buy their houses back, if it were decided that Doel could stay. A lot of people took this chance, and when the term for selling was over, in 2003, only 214 people remained in Doel officially. The school was closed in 2003 because there were only 8 children.
People who sold their houses were allowed to rent their sold house until 2007; this was prolonged until 2009. Other houses were – theoretically – up for rent. Some were used by squatters and it seemed that anybody could break into uninhabited houses and use them.

In 2006 there were more police controls and illegal activities were no longer tolerated. Squatters could apply for regularisation, they had to pay rent and comply with some basic restrictions. More than 120 regularisations were applied for.
The company that bought the houses should have maintained them in a good state, but this didn't happen, of course. The empty houses dilapidated and some were demolished. It was obvious the company tried to get the last inhabitants to leave by letting houses dilapidate and by gradually demolishing the town.

The classic shot: the windmill and the nuclear plant

Action committees like Doel 2020 opposed strongly and the courts decided no more houses were to be demolished. Every now and then "dangerous" houses are demolished and the whole outcry starts again.
As of 2009, the Government decided that the fate of Doel would no longer depend on the building of the Saeftinghedock – which is still not certain – and that the rented houses have to be cleared since the right of living in Doel ended in 2009. The court, however, decided that people can't be evicted. The 11 families that still own their houses can't be disowned as long as there's no decision on the Deurganckdock but they are once again offered the possibility of selling their home voluntarily.

Doel attracts artists of different sorts – most notably graffiti taggers – and there is a good degree of poetry in this village which is still fighting against the industry and the political system. It's more and more becoming a curiosity. Recently, some of the houses with graffiti were painted white by inhabitants and members of '*Groen!*', the ecological political party which keeps fighting against the demolition of Doel.

Once a year Doel attracts thousands of people with the baptism of the Scheldt, and from time to time expositions or small music festivals take place there.

You can find more information on Doel on http://www.doel2020.org/cat.php?ID=17, the website of the action committee that wants to preserve Doel.

Visiting Doel by car is the easiest way. Public transportation doesn't service Doel very often. However, you can take a bus to the village from the pedestrian tunnel where our city walk through Antwerp begins. You'll need bus 83, but not all of them go as far as Doel.
Doel2020 informs you on how to reach the village by bus:
http://www.doel2020.org/Documentatie/Openbaar%20vervoer.htm

Doel isn't a big village so it's no use in giving you directions for a walk. There's ample parking space. One of the classic pictures is the old windmill of Doel (which now serves as a restaurant) with the nuclear plant in the background. In the graveyard of the church there's a very touching picture on a headstone, of an old couple in front of their farm in Doel. Facing the church, go left to see the Hooghuis, a house dating from the 1600s.

The nuclear plant can be visited, but only if you arrange so in advance. If you haven't made any reservations there's no use in going there. Reservations can be made through visits@electrabel.com.
Birdhouses for peregrine falcons were attached to the cooling towers, and if you're lucky you'll see the falcons in Doel or the surrounding pastures.
There is a webcam attached to the inside of the birdhouse. It doesn't film anything; it only takes pictures every now and then. These photos can be seen on
http://www.electrabel.be/whoarewe/newscorner/environmentalprojects_falcon01.aspx