

Sunday Herald travel

URBAN RENAISSANCE



CHANGING TIMES
The harbour area in Antwerp.
PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

Delectable pursuit

Antwerp in Belgium used to be the most powerful and influential centre of trade, printing and culture till the Spanish invasion. But today, a lot of its wealth has found its way into majestic squares, churches and religious art, says KALPANA SUNDER

A train station is sometimes a telling introduction to a city. Antwerp's train station is appropriately dubbed a railway cathedral—it's the most majestic one that I have seen with marble and glass, gleaming floors, sculptures of lions and a fantastic dome. Antwerp in Flanders, Belgium, used to be a powerful and influential centre of trade, printing and culture till the Spanish invasion. A lot of its wealth found its way into majestic squares, churches and religious art. Today, it's the second most important port in Europe after Rotterdam.

Diamond district

Diamond trade came here in the 15th century and ever since, this city has always had a love affair with the big rocks. Our guide, Vera Verschooren, begins our Antwerp odyssey at the Diamond Museum. We learn about the chemical structure of these rocks, how they are polished till they are the glittering beauties, something all women pine for.

Our 'wow' moment is a walk through dark corridors to the treasures on each floor of the museum. They have the most exquisite treasures — footwear with diamond encrusted heels, Napoleon's gift to his lady friend, a brooch belonging to Empress Sisi of Austria, stone-encrusted tiaras and other marvelous creations. Almost 85 per cent of the rough diamonds in the world are traded in the Diamond Quarter in Antwerp and 65 per cent of diamond-related business is done by Indians. The main street in the heart of the Diamond Quarter, near the station, is

a heavily guarded zone with street cameras. Buying diamonds here is safe and ethical; blood diamonds are illegal.

Antwerp is also a city in the throes of an urban renaissance. An 18th century city palace, which was the headquarters of Napoleon, is now the City Festival Hall. It was damaged by fire in 2000 and has been renovated into a luxury shopping mall with sweeping marble staircases, gold leaf, and an enormous globe dome with a luxe champagne bar. The just-opened iconic MAS, a red stone and glass museum with contemporary architecture in the harbour area, is dedicated to the city's rich maritime history. The swish building, with 3,000 shiny hands decorating its façade and panoramic views from every level, is filled with some terrific art.

Peter Pauls Rubens, the artist, is the city's most celebrated citizen and you can't escape him anywhere. We visit the house where he lived as an adult-Rubenshuis, a baroque mansion with a tranquil garden. This was the house where dignitaries and royalty visited him and he also had his studio here. His self-portrait and a painting of Adam and Eve are the stunners here. We follow the Rubens trail to the unusual Museum Plantin Moretus, a UNESCO listed museum dedicated to the history of printing. This was home to Christopher Plantin, who had one of the earliest printing businesses in 1555, and has a great collection of Rubens' paintings. We walk through his office, print shop and foundry, which have some of the oldest printing presses and books, including a Gutenberg bible.



PICTURE PERFECT Home of Antwerp's most celebrated artist, Peter Paul Rubens.

Vera mixes our history and art appreciation lessons with tasty bites and delicious drinks. Antwerp, like most of Belgium, has a massive sweet tooth. Waffles with a range of toppings, from fresh cream to Nutella, are sold everywhere. We visit Dominique Persoone's Chocolate Line, housed in the opulent Belgian Royal Family's former residence. This looks more like a Bond Street jeweller's shop with an open kitchen where you can watch the chocolates being created.

There are chocolates with unusual ingredients like black olives, lipsticks with chocolate and even a 'chocolate shooter' for a pure cocoa high. Del Ray Chocolaterie has some special diamond chocolates filled with cognac and champagne and some multi-coloured macaroons. The local tipple is jenever, the Belgian take on gin. Vera takes us to an old cosy pub called De Vagant where we are introduced to its pleasures. There are more than 200 varieties with even one made from cacti.

Laidback lifestyle

The city seems to have a languid pace with open air cafes, bicycles and trams. Our Rubens trail ends at the Cathedral of Our Lady, one of the tallest churches in Europe, that dominates the city skyline. Rubens' 'Raising of the Cross' and 'Descent from the Cross' are the stunning works displayed here. Close by is the Grote market. This has the stunning 16th Century City Hall with hundreds of technicoloured flags and rows of tall gabled guild houses with golden statues decorating them.

A statue of the mythical hero of the city, Brabo, stands in the centre of the square. Lore has it that the city used to be terrorised by a giant, who made all the passing ships pay a toll. One day, a brave lad called Brabo killed the giant, chopped off his hand and threw it into the Scheldt River. The city's name is derived from the Flemish word translated as 'hand throw' and the hand is a symbol of the city, which is found on emblems and souvenirs across Antwerp.

Antwerp is also an avant-garde fashion capital. In the '80s, six designers, called the 'Antwerp Six', stormed the design scene. Today, the main shopping mile, Meir, has a plethora of exclusive boutiques and departmental stores. Our gourmet meal at the swish and contemporary Flammant brasserie, atop the distinguished interiors store by the same name, has some delicious linguini with black truffle tapenade and local beer. Vera is not done. She takes us for a coffee break to Gunter Wate's Chocolate Café where we relax under glitzy chandeliers with a chocolate coffee. History, good food, diamonds and art are indeed a delectable combination.

QUIRKY ATTRACTIONS

Mawlynnong: God's own garden

No candy wrapper. No *gutka* sachet. No crumpled packet of chips. Not even a cigarette butt. We tried as hard as we could, but it was impossible to find any litter in Mawlynnong. This tiny speck on the Indo-Bangladesh border of Meghalaya takes its claim as 'the cleanest village in Asia' quite seriously. It was like trying to find an illiterate Malayali in Ernakulam.

Soon, we chanced upon some yellow chocolate wrappers which we assumed a few errant schoolchildren must have recklessly thrown. To our surprise, the shiny wrappers wafted off magically like butterflies. In fact, they were butterflies! Nothing seemed out of place in this picture-postcard setting — flower-lined pathways, thatch baskets outside every home and roads that gleamed like they do on election eve or to welcome a dignitary. Our guide, Henry Kharrymba, took us past a green sign 'Mawlynnong: God's own garden', the Balang Presbyterian Church and deposited us at the Mawlynnong Guest House & Machan.

As we gingerly stepped on the creaky bamboo pathway, Henry's disarming smile indicated this was an all-too-familiar routine. Emboldened, we walked into the house on stilts, with cosy interiors of straw, bamboo and thatch, a sit-out and an extended balcony. Through the dense foliage, we could hear a stream below. Soon, our hostess brought in steaming cups of black tea and after a quick break we were all set for our tryst with Mawlynnong.

"Nice musical name," we chimed. "Do you see those round cavities in the stones around here?" Henry asked. "They are hollow depressions caused by rainwater and that's what it means in Khasi, maw lynnong — stone with a cavity," he explained. A few hundred meters outside the village was a gated enclosure where a large boulder sat precariously on a stone. Henry beamed as he introduced us to Maw Rynghew Sharatia or Balancing Rock. It was an ancient Khasi shrine that pre-dated the advent of Christianity in Meghalaya. We hiked two km to Riwai for yet another startling discovery.

Roots and wings

A flight of stone steps and a crude signboard with Jing Kieng Jri scrawled on it didn't say much. But when we saw it, our jaws dropped. Spanning a gurgling stream was a natural bridge made up of knotted roots. Meghalaya is known for its centuries-old tradition of living root bridges used to cross streams in remote mountainous areas. The pliant roots of the ficus elastica tree are entwined such that they grow into an elaborate lattice. Over time the bridge becomes so strong that it can be paved with stone. It was an unwritten rule that if any villager noticed a new root, he had to weave it into the mesh. Before we could rip our clothes and jump into the water, Henry stopped us. He had a better place in mind.

A short hike off the road brought us to the spectacular Niriang Falls created by the Wah Rymben River, which plummeted 300 mts into a large, deep pool. Luckily, we were the only visitors and appropriated the whole site. Henry sat patiently watching us make fools of ourselves. "Feeling cold?" he shouted over the din of the cataract. We nodded. "How about some Khasi vodka?" It was our quickest exit from a waterfall ever.

We took a different route back to Mawlynnong via Maw Rym Song for some *kyiud* (rice beer). After glugging down a few glasses of the potent colourless brew, we headed back to the village, on wobbly knees. But instead of our bamboo hut, Henry took us to Sky View, a rickety bamboo perch with a panoramic view. It was a tricky climb and as we paused to catch our drunken breath, Henry pointed at the green rice fields, "All that is Bangladesh." A strong wind blew in and dark clouds gathered on the horizon. It was time to head home.

Back at the hut, a spread of hot pork, jackfruit, rice and *dal* awaited us. The wind whistled eerily through the cracks in the bamboo and we spotted white flashes of lightning outside. We decided to take a post-dinner walk and the great gig in the sky lured us further away to the edge of Mawlynnong for an unhindered view. When a local told us to follow the steps past the graveyard, we hesitated. "I'll take you," he offered. "During the rainy season, it is even more intense, very scary," he added. In silence, we watched streaks of lightning light up the ominous clouds over the dark plains of Bangladesh.

"So what's your name," we asked. "Seventy One," he replied. "71?" "Yea, I was named after the year I was born," he revealed. "That's pretty unusual," we exclaimed. The local elaborated further, "It's nothing. In Meghalaya, peo-



RARITY Take a walk in the clean and green environs of Mawlynnong and visit the living root bridge, a centuries-old tradition in Meghalaya. PHOTOS BY AUTHORS



ple name their kids after anything that catches their fancy — Christian names, political figures, celebrities, countries, or random English words like truck, bus, state, reliance, whatever!"

We listened agape as Seventy One listed out Meghalaya's eccentric nomenclature. Here, Frankenstein, Hitler, Roosevelt, Churchill, Chamberlain, Lenin and Stalin fought for elections. Ulysses had sisters named England, New Zealand, Finland and Switzerland while another sweet trio were called Institute, Constitute and Prostitute! Boys weren't spared too — a garage owner named his sons 1st Gear, 2nd Gear and 3rd Gear while Toilet Marbaniang didn't bother about what his name meant either. The origin of this perplexing phenomenon goes back to the British occupation of the north-east in the 1850s. The oral dialects of the Garo-

Khasi-Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya, like Nagaland, adopted English as their script and subsequent conversion to Christianity spurred the blind adoption of anything English.

The next morning, we caught the only van out of Mawlynnong back to Shillong. As we rolled past fields of tall grass on either side, we casually asked what they were. "Thysanolaena maxima or broom grass," said Pastor Henry. He thrust a small parcel wrapped in a newspaper into our hands. "Something to remember us by," he smiled. The souvenir was a neatly crafted short broom. Ironic that in this tiny village obsessed with cleanliness, the most lucrative crop was broom grass!

In a country notorious for its lack of public hygiene, places like Mawlynnong are a ray of hope.

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