

## INTRODUCING BOTANIC SANCTUARY ANTWERP – AND A NEW KIND OF LUXURY



Hidden in the heart of historic Antwerp, Botanic Sanctuary is the 5\* superior result of a spectacular five-year restoration project. Conjured out of a crumbling old monastery, hospital and gardens dating back to the 13th century, this opulent new hotel, spa, and Michelin-starred restaurant complex is just a few hours away by train.

A member of the Leading Hotels of the World, the newly opened 108-room Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp sprawls across a 20,000sqm site where monks founded a hospital and monastery in 1238. Exquisitely restored, it is made up of five historic buildings – including an apothecary the restoration's architects were thrilled to find intact and a 15th century chapel – plus a three-storey new spa, all set around a series of gardens and courtyards. Besides five restaurants – three with Michelin stars – the Botanic also has a collection of 14 atmospheric event and meeting rooms, and an exclusive whisky investor's club deep in the vaults.

If guests leave the hotel, there's plenty to see and do in this walkable old city. Antwerp is well-known for its perfectly preserved 16th century step-gabled houses, built by the 1500s merchants who made this North Sea port as wealthy as its rival Venice. Coffee is an obsession here – Antwerp is now the second biggest port in Europe after Rotterdam, and 80% of Europe's coffee arrives through its docks – and the city has countless intriguing little cafes, from the Café Beveren, with its 1930s art deco dance organ, to the romantic Salon de thé Claude.

In the 16th century, Rubens, Van Eyck and the Breughels all lived and worked in Antwerp, so the city's art collections are superb – notably at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, recently reopened after a 12-year restoration. The MoMu fashion museum pays homage to the famous 'Antwerp Six' design heroes of the 1990s, including Dries van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester. The Plantin-Moretus museum houses the oldest printing press in the world, still standing in the same spot since the 1550s. All these attractions are a 10 to 20 minute stroll from the hotel. 'But we find many guests simply want to stay put,' says Managing Director Marc Alofs. 'So many people have such stressful, busy lives now, it's a delight for them to just relax, have a late breakfast experience, perhaps a massage, then eat in a different – Michelin-starred! – restaurant each evening, without needing to go any further than across a courtyard to the lift afterwards. Several guests have mentioned how much they enjoy being in bed about 10 minutes after finishing dinner!'

### **From Shabby to Spectacular**

Named for the botanic garden the 16th century botanist Peeter van Coudenberghe planted to provide medicinal herbs for the hospital, Botanic Sanctuary is the result of Belgian property developer IRET's multi-million-euro restoration of the 20,000sqm site between Gasthuisstraat and Leopoldstraat.

Led by the husband and wife heading IRET, Eric De Vocht and Maryse Odeurs, veteran developers who had long had their eye on the site, the project started in 2017 and first saw historian Anneleen Cassiman delve into local archives to research the lovely but dilapidated ancient buildings' history. Architects and interior designers then set about working out how to preserve as much of the original structures as possible while installing up to the minute plumbing, heating and technology. The Wi-Fi is, of course, superfast. Herringbone-pattern red-brick walls were repointed, roof tiles replaced, and, inside, old wood shutters were made good, ceiling beams sanded and underfloor heating installed.

The soaring-vaulted 15<sup>th</sup> century chapel at the centre of the complex has become a dramatic setting for weddings, concerts and events. The many-pillared former infirmary, once lined with beds for the ill, is now Amaryllis Hall, centrepiece of Botanic Sanctuary's events offer.

Botanic Sanctuary is also home to Antwerp's leading and largest congress centre. With 2,450sqm of banqueting and events spaces in a centuries-old location, the 14 multifunctional conference rooms combine historic ambience with a full spectrum of state-of-the-art technology.

Everyone involved with the project was thrilled when they discovered the old apothecary was in a good enough condition to need merely an intensive de-cobwebbing and then a little replastering and painting to become the Saint Charles Store, an updated niche-brand apothecary with shelves filled with pure essential oils, herbal blends, skin creams and room fragrances.

### **A World of Tranquility**

The Botanic Health Spa lies across the leafy courtyard from the apothecary. Incorporating the red-brick wall of the former orangery, but otherwise entirely purpose-built, this state-of-the-art spa is home to an expert team of therapists focussed on delivering a combination of Traditional European and Traditional Chinese Medicine, blended with phytotherapy and the ancient Monastic Medicine for which Peeter van Coudenberghe planted the first medicinal garden here in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Three fragrant, light-filled floors house 10 minimalist treatment rooms, an 18-metre pool – so unusual in a city-centre hotel – and a gym. State-of-the-art equipment includes InBody Scan and TechnoGym, Biostrength and Artis Cardio machines. Treatments range from massages and facials and head-to-toe wedding-preparation sessions to five-day holistic healing programmes, a seven-day intensive detox, and the metabolism-boosting, immune-system-supporting and skin-transforming therapies the MyLife Changer programme delivers for long-term benefits.

Deeply comfortable and visually a delight indoors and out, there's no element of flash, waste or bling at Botanic Sanctuary. Repair and reuse could describe the restoration process that saw the creaking old buildings turned into 74 rooms and 34 suites. Sustainability and understated luxury were the watchwords for the interior decoration, with natural materials – wool, linen, silks, sisal – used for furnishings and floorings.

### **Stargazing Gastronomy**

'Source locally' was the mantra in the food and beverage department. Besides the three Michelin-starred restaurants, all run by their own celebrity master chefs – Roger van Damme in the lunch and dessert only Het Gabaar, Gert De Mangeleer and Joachim Boudens in Hertog Jan, and Jacob Jan Boerma and Thomas Diepersloot in Fine Fleur – there is also the 1238 restaurant, overlooking the monastery garden, and Gert De Mangeleer's Bar Bulot, a popular local destination for Antwerp's wealthy young start-up stars.

Cosy Henry's Bar, named after the 19<sup>th</sup> century botanist and first director of the botanical garden that adjoins Botanic Sanctuary, Henri Ferdinand Van Heurck, serves snacks alongside its cocktails and mocktails.

And to the delight of many, the Botanic is also noted for its knockout breakfasts, with local Belgian cheeses and charcuterie, home-made jams, perfect croissants, a dozen different breads, and delectable range of vegan favourites, compotes, mueslis, yogurts and granolas. It's called the Botanic Breakfast Experience – and it alone is worth the trip to Antwerp.

#### **About IRET, developers of Botanic Sanctuary**

Behind Botanic Sanctuary is the Belgian property company IRET, headed by Eric De Vocht and Maryse Odeurs. The veteran developers had long had their eye on the five historic but dilapidated buildings next to the 200-year-old Botanical Garden. When in 2017 the couple signed a 99-year lease on the site, they knew they had a challenge on their hands. But they also knew this chance to restore a historic landmark could be their lifetime achievement.

'Antwerp has long had an impressive line-up of hotels,' says Marc Alofs, appointed MD of Botanic Sanctuary by the IRET owners, Eric De Vocht and Maryse Odeurs. 'But it was missing something truly luxurious: a hotel that paid rightful homage to the city's great past, its golden age, and its rank today as a centre for art and design, fashion, technology, and multi-faceted trade.' As the city's first 5-star superior hotel, Botanic Sanctuary now places Antwerp firmly on the map as a destination for international guests who enjoy exploring the very best the world has to offer. The hotel's historic authenticity, added to its city-centre yet tranquil location, and its exceptional status as a gastronomic destination, made this an exceptional project and one especially close to the hearts of everyone at IRET. 'I know the IRET team also pays tribute to the resourceful and talented teams of architectural, interior and landscaping designers responsible for the Botanic's design excellence.'

#### **About Antwerp**

Belgium's largest, liveliest and most cosmopolitan city lies 45km/28 miles north of Brussels and 15km/9miles south of the Dutch border. On the river Sheldt, 88km/55 miles inland from the North Sea, it is the second largest port in Europe after Rotterdam and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the city's Golden Age, rivalled Venice as the busiest city port in Europe. Despite heavy German bombing in WW2, 16<sup>th</sup> century elements remain – including the ridiculously photogenic 1565 City Hall and tall step-gabled merchants' houses around Grote Markt.

The city is noted for its numerous museums, including the magnificent 19<sup>th</sup> century Royal Museum of Fine Art, which recently reopened after a 12-year refurbishment, and the 10-storey, 65m dockside MAS, which tells the cultural, trading and art history of Antwerp. It has also put its entire, brilliantly curated, collection online ([mas.be](http://mas.be)). The Red Star Line Museum tells the story of migration from Europe to America via Antwerp, and the Fotomuseum has an outstanding collection of historic photographs.

Bike and electric bike rental schemes operate across the city.

#### **Further local information**

||| [Visit.antwerpen.be](http://Visit.antwerpen.be)

#### **Getting there**

**By train:** Eurostar fares for its London St Pancras to Brussels Midi/Zuid service (1 hr 53 min) include the 35-minute onward train ride (one level down, so just a few minutes' walk, from the Eurostar platform) to Antwerp, and the beautiful Art Nouveau-Neo Renaissance Centraal station. Built in 1905, it has been voted the second most beautiful station in the world after



Grand Central Station in Manhattan. The station is a 20-minute walk or 10-minute drive from the hotel, which can arrange a transfer.

**By air:** Antwerp International, a 20-minute drive from the hotel, has direct one-hour flights from London City Airport with LuxAir. Brussels International has direct 1 hr 12 min flights from British Airways, American Airlines and Japan Airlines, and Brussels S.Charleroi has direct flights from Ryanair and WizzAir. Botanic Sanctuary can arrange transfers.

**By car:** Driving from Calais to Antwerp without stopping typically takes just under three hours.

**By coach:** Flixbus.co.uk operates from London Victoria to Antwerp; 8 hr 30 mins each way, from under £50 return.



#### FURTHER INFORMATION

- ||| [www.botanicantwerp.be](http://www.botanicantwerp.be)
- ||| Leopoldstraat 26, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium
- ||| Download: [Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp | Flickr](#)

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