

A LEADING DESTINATION SPA IN BELGIUM INTRODUCING THE BOTANIC HEALTH SPA



Behind tall walls, surrounded by peaceful gardens, the Botanic Health Spa is part of an original 15th century monastery complex. After an extraordinary five-year, £48m+ restoration, this recently opened as the five-star Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp, a member of the *Leading Hotels of the World*. The 1,000sqm Botanic Health Spa is an airy three storeys of glass, wood, brick and stone, built on the site of the monastery's old orangery. The building and spa concept tick every eco and sustainability box. Run a finger down the wide-ranging treatment menu and you might find it hard to choose. Osteopathy, physiotherapy, blood analysis, spiritual healing, kinesiology, electromagnetic frequency therapy.

Sightseeing-weariness can be soothed away by a hot-stone treatment, head-to-toe ritual, or classic or four-handed massage. You could lie back for a restorative 50-minute facial. Book a Botanical Signature Treatment amalgamating elements of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Traditional European Medicine. Work out in the top-floor gym. Join a Yoga class. Swim in the 18m glass-roofed pool. Sweat in a steam room or sauna: infrared, Finnish or Himalayan salt stone.

But the spa provides more than a pleasing place to disappear into between exploring the Botanic 15th century chapel, 16th century former infirmary or restored 19th century apothecary.

Monastic Medicine: Ancient and Modern

The Botanic Health Spa has made it its mission to revive the tradition of healing in step with nature, while always being open to new developments, that the Augustinian monks – natural naturopaths – cloistered in the monastery here practiced for centuries. Monastic medicine not only formed the basis of Traditional European Medicine (TEM) but signalled the way for modern herbalists' scientific and holistic approach.

Our own era has, of course, brought impressive medical advances in the range of illnesses, diseases and health problems that can be cured or improved. But the drugs used have sometimes produced unwanted side-effects for which doctors have offered only ... more drugs.

Recent years have seen a growing desire for natural healing and non-drug solutions to health problems. The mission of the Botanic Health Spa, therefore, was to carry the naturopathic monks' tradition of monastic and natural healing into our millennium via the use of plant-based remedies – and to use cutting-edge computer diagnostics to help discover the root of the problem.

Meet Master Therapist and Health Guru Xavier Le Clef

The Botanic Health Spa's director and mastermind is Xavier Le Clef. And if your heart skips a beat at word of a new health guru, it's wise to book a session with Le Clef as soon as you've firmed up your travel plans. Le Clef's exceptional diagnostic skills and solutions-based treatments are well known in Antwerp, where for years he has been in private practice. Appointments get booked up quickly.

Beijing-trained, the tall, energetic and engaging Le Clef is a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) specialist as well as an expert in cutting-edge vital-fields screening and frequency therapy. Like the

Augustinian monks who for centuries tended a medicinal garden here, growing the herbs for remedies with which they treated the sick, Le Clef bases almost all his treatments on plants.

Also like the monks, who would have been constantly alert for word of new plants and formulations and, educated in centuries when most people were illiterate, faithfully disseminated their discoveries via herbal treatises, Le Clef blends the new and old. Generous with his advice and information, as much as anyone can he also keeps abreast of the vast amount of scientific research currently going into health, physical and mental, so that he can stay on top of cutting-edge treatments.

So the result is that if you arrive with one of those niggling health issues GPs seem unable to sort out, or just with a desire to feel better, physically or mentally, there's a good chance you'll leave the Botanic Health Spa with a solution to what ails you, plus a plan for going forward.

A Holistic Approach

Each treatment with Le Clef starts with a TCM diagnostic procedure. That means a physical inspection, including of your tongue, eyes, hair and hands; palpation; and questions about your physical complaints, mental worries, lifestyle, eating habits, social environment, and emotional upsets. Next, Le Clef uses a full-body screening programme for a visualisation of imbalances, toxin loads, energy blockages and weak points. The data thus collected builds the foundation for a personalised therapy and treatment programme to help the body self-heal.

Spa Director, Xavier Le Clef

In this fast-moving and demanding world, the health of body, mind and spirit is increasingly a primary focus as the effects of our lifestyle become evident in emotional as well as physical complaints. Only a holistic approach can offer lasting solutions. We gently guide our clients back to the roots of their issues, and this allows us to create a basis for the solution at source, rather than merely chipping away at the symptoms.

Health Coaching

Part of the holistic healing concept involves delving deep into the root causes of a person's symptoms and issues and revising the habits that have contributed to their problems. Health coaching at the Botanic focuses on personalised wellbeing, and looks at each person individually. A guest's lifestyle, nutrition, movement, relationships, sleep and stress load are examined in detail to identify the source of any imbalances of the body, mind and emotions. We then work on a plan to change certain aspects of the guest's lifestyle for the sake of greater equilibrium. The restoration of balance results in a healthier mind and body, and a more energetic and fulfilled life.

The Botanic's Health Coach, Kim Smolders, is a certified Functional Medicine Health Coach who works closely with the Botanic's Traditional Chinese Medicine and Traditional European Medicine practitioners and personal trainers. Together, they create tailor-made solutions. Kim takes a direct approach to empower guests, helping them discover the best wellness routines to meet their unique health objectives.

Mylife Changer – the Core of the Botanic Health Spa Philosophy

The synergy between traditional forms of medicine and modern science also underpins the unique solutions-oriented concept practiced at the Botanic Health Spa. Mylife Changer uses cosmeceuticals, manual therapy, device-based skin rejuvenation, tonics, and dietary supplements. The result, says Le Clef, is sustainably healthy and regenerated cell metabolism that slows cell ageing, boosts the immune system and promotes cell renewal.

A key aim, when the Botanic Health Spa was set up, was that it would pursue new and forward-looking routes to lasting physical fitness, good mental health and resilience and general wellbeing. The Mylife Changer concept has already established an impressive range of holistic solutions and preventive treatments.

Customised Mylife Changer journeys are effective in tackling skin issues such as acne, rosacea, hyperpigmentation and psoriasis; boosting the immune system; cleansing the gut; detoxing; starting a fitness programme; improving digestive health; changing how we tackle stress; and getting wedding ready. (Not uncoincidentally, the 15th century chapel, now deconsecrated, at Botanic Sanctuary has become a popular place to get married).

Botanic Health Club

For those who would rather work out, the latest Technogym equipment fills the top floor gym, which looks out over the hotel gardens' treetops. Personal training is available from Sports Director, ex-professional golfer and fitness expert Ingmar Harthoorn and his team. As this area is also part of the Botanic Health Club, Antwerp's most exclusive fitness address, there are daily classes to join, including Yoga and bio-circuit training. Like the 18m pool, the gym is open 24/7 for hotel guests and Health Club members.

A 19th Century Apothecary for the 21st Century

Wander across the courtyard from the spa into Botanic Sanctuary's elegantly restored 19th century pharmacy, Saint Charles, and you may well find yourself spending rather more time there than planned. Established in Vienna in 1886, the Saint Charles brand is now run by a sixth-generation pharmacist, Alexander Ehrmann, and his obsession with the power of plants ensures irresistible natural and organic skincare – along with other niche-brand products – fill the pharmacy's shelves.

So be warned. You may leave the Botanic Sanctuary with an unplanned bagful of irresistible aromatherapy oils, natural cosmetics, nutritional supplements, and exquisite room sprays. As well as with a resolve to come back to this star among second cities soon, before Antwerp emerges from under the radar.

It is therefore time, perhaps, for anyone planning their next weekend away to forget about the capitals – Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, all now perpetually rammed with tourists – and think instead about a second tier, under the radar city. Antwerp, for instance. So close, yet relatively unknown. And a joy to discover. For centuries quietly at the centre of the world's diamond trade, Antwerp has cobbled streets and old cafes, some spectacular Renaissance buildings, and world-class museums, shops, and restaurants. From London, it's barely three hours by train. Getting around its historic streets is easy, on foot or by rental bike or bus. Best of all? For those who like to sink on to a massage bed while away, the sparkling new spa in the heart of lovely Antwerp.

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Notes to editors:

Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp

Property developers Eric De Vocht and Marise Odeurs had long had their eyes on the old, partly 15th century monastery complex in the heart of Antwerp before it was put up for sale in 2017. They unveiled the 108-room, five-star Botanic Sanctuary, a member of the prestigious Leading Hotels of the World marketing group, in 2022, after a five-year, £48m + renovation of five historic buildings and the creation of several new buildings, including the Botanic Health Spa.

With five restaurants, three Michelin-starred plus local hot-spots Bar Bulot and 1238 – named after the date of the first building on the site, the Sint Elisabeth hospital – as well as the state-of-the-art Botanic Health Spa, spectacular breakfasts, and weekly Sunday brunches, the hotel has become a popular destination for local movers and shakers as well as visiting weekenders.

Room rates from €325 for two sharing, including 6% tax

Behind the Botanic – a Botanical Garden and Famous Pharmacist

Botanic Sanctuary's name was inspired by the botanical garden laid out in the monastery grounds in the 16th century. This was planted by Antwerp's famous botanist and pharmacist, Peeter Van Coudenberghe (1517-1599). It was in his pharmacy that the plants were turned into the monastic medicine remedies administered by the monks.

Van Coudenberghe's translation and annotation of Valerius Cordus's book itemising the medicinal use of plants, *Dispensatorium*, published in Antwerp in 1568, remained a standard work into the 19th century. It was printed by the world's first printers to publish on an industrial scale, Christophe Plantin and then his son-in-law Jan Moretus – the Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg of their day – who set up in Antwerp in 1576.

Their original premises now form Antwerp's Plantin-Moretus museum. The only museum in UNESCO's World Heritage list, this houses the world's oldest printing presses (museumplantinmoretus.be).

Antwerp

In the 1500s, Antwerp was the leading port in Europe, rivalled in wealth only by Venice, and home to artists such as Rubens, Van Eyck, and Breughel the Elder. It became and remains the centre of the world's diamond trade and is now the second biggest port in Europe after Rotterdam.

In the 1980s and 90s the city became famous for its fashion scene, spearheaded by the 'Antwerp Six', graduates of the city's Royal Museum of Fine Arts' fashion school, including Dries Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester. In the early 2000s London clubbers helped make it an epicentre of rave culture. Today the city is known for its excellent museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts, which opened in the autumn of 2022 after an 11-year refurbishment, and the fashion museum, MoMu, and for its lively independent cafés, restaurants, nightlife and fashion scene. Dries Van Noten and cult favourites Essentiel Antwerp have their flagship stores here, of course.

Getting There

By train: Eurostar tickets for the 1hr 53 minute rail journey from London to Brussels include the 35-minute onward journey to Antwerp. Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp is a 10-minute taxi ride or 20-minute walk from Antwerp's dramatic Centraal Station, built in 1905, and as stations go, generally regarded as outdone only by New York's Grand Central.

By car: It is a three-hour non-stop drive from Calais to Antwerp.

By plane: Antwerp International Airport is a 20-minute drive from the Botanic and there are numerous UK-Brussels flights.