

# Spend a day walking through Ghent



**Rick Steves**

Once one of Belgium's medieval powerhouses, Ghent is home to one of Belgium's biggest universities and a vibrant student population. While it has plenty of pretty canals and gables, it also enjoys a certain amount of urban grittiness, with a welcome splash of creative hipster funkiness.

Ghent is very walkable, and I enjoy strolling through the old town in this extremely Flemish city, where the native language is Dutch — but everyone also speaks English.

I start in a square called Korenmarkt (Grain Market), the center of historic Ghent. This still looks much like it did circa 1500, when this was one of Europe's greatest cities, bristling with skyscraping towers, rich with art, and thronged with hard-working and prosperous citizens. Back then, Ghent's population was around 65,000; north of the Alps, only Paris was larger. Two-thirds of its citizens were textile workers, meaning Ghent was arguably Europe's first industrial city. With its wealth, it became the proud city of soaring towers you see today.

Near the square, I wander onto St. Michael's Bridge, which provides Ghent's best 360-degree panorama. The waterway under my feet — now plied by tourist-laden boats — was the city's busy harbor. Lining the embankment are several ornately decorated guild houses — meeting halls for the town's boatmen, grain traders and weighers.

Turning around, I head away from the river. Beyond a medieval church stands the big, wooden roof



Traffic goes by St. Bavo's Cathedral, which houses "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb," in Ghent's historical center in Belgium. EMMANUEL DUNAND/GETTY-AFP 2014

of the market hall. Just a couple decades ago, this space was no more than an ugly parking lot. Now, it's a public square, partially sheltered by the hall's modern twin-gabled roof, meant to evoke the rooftops of medieval Ghent. While many residents embrace the market, some find its avant-garde style jarring. (It's been called the "Sheep Shed" and the "Hall of Shame.")

Next door is the Belfry. Although most of this tower has stood here since the 14th century, its Neo-Gothic top spire was added when Ghent proudly hosted a World's Fair in 1913. Visitors ascend the Belfry to share the gargoyles' decent, if not stunning, view over town.

On the other side of the

Belfry is St. Bavo's Square and Ghent's top sight: St. Bavo's Cathedral. This towering Gothic church houses the pearl of Flemish painting — the Ghent Altarpiece, also known as "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb." Jan and Hubert van Eyck's work has been called the most influential painting in European art. It's considered the first masterpiece done in the medium of oil and the first to portray the stark realism of the everyday world.

Hubert began the painting, but after his death, his better-known younger brother, Jan, completed his vision in 1432, taking a colossal stride in Northern European art from medieval stiffness to Renaissance humanism.

The work is

monumental: 15 feet wide and 11 feet tall, it's composed of a dozen separate panels depicting hundreds of figures — and weighs more than a ton. Its central panel shows pilgrims gathered to honor the Lamb of God (representing Jesus), while other panels depict Adam and Eve, the Annunciation, the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. It challenges visitors with its complex symbolism, multitude of rich details and sheer scale — but it rewards those willing to invest the time to take it all in.

Somehow the Ghent Altarpiece has survived for six centuries. It's been the victim of a half-dozen art thefts — perhaps the most stolen painting in existence. Even Adolf Hitler

claimed it as war booty. In 1934, someone broke into St. Bavo's and stole the Just Judges panel and, nearly a century later, the panel has yet to turn up. In its place is a top-notch copy.

The theft remains Belgium's greatest unsolved art mystery.

Leaving the church, I walk north until I hit Hoogpoort, the main street of medieval Ghent. I'm headed for the castle at the end of this lane: the Castle of the Counts.

Built in 1180, this rough-stone fortress was designed not to protect the people of Ghent, but to intimidate the city's independence-minded citizens. You get a real feel for the medieval world as you twist through its towers and ramble its ramparts. It

has all the parts of a typical castle: courtyard and keep, throne room, chapel, high walls and 18-foot-deep dungeon. Inside, there are displays of authentic swords and suits of armor, along with a guillotine that was last used in 1861.

Since it's so close to Brussels and Bruges — about 30 minutes away from both — Ghent is a popular day-trip destination. But it's the kind of town that makes many who visit for just a few hours leave wishing they had more time.

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## CELEBRITY TRAVEL

### Wilde searches for local flavors

By Jae-Ha Kim  
Tribune Content Agency

Actor, producer and wellness entrepreneur Zina Wilde is used to traveling the world. Born in London and raised in Thessaloniki (Greece), she splits her time between homes in New York and Los Angeles. Wilde said one of the things she has learned over the years is to go with the flow.

"Plan things, but not too many. Learn how to let go and get uncomfortable," she said. "Sometimes, travel is difficult when things don't go as you wish, but that's the whole point. Doing things that make you uncomfortable sometimes gives you confidence. It's not always about the luxury experience. I love learning what locals do and meeting them."

This interview with Wilde has been edited for clarity and length.

**Q: Do you have any upcoming trips planned?**

**A:** I do! I have one coming up in Santorini, Greece, where my dad's side of the family hailed from for many generations.

**Q: Have you visited places for work that were so nice that you traveled back there for a personal trip?**

**A:** I loved visiting Ireland while doing a show and would love to go back. I felt like there was so much more to explore.

**Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?**

**A:** I am a little biased, but Greece is at the top of my list. For a beach vacation I think it's the best. For city



For actor and wellness entrepreneur Zina Wilde, Greece can't be beat. KENNETH DOLAN

life, my favorite is Paris or New York.

**Q: What untapped destination should people know about?**

**A:** If you haven't been to Koufonisia in Greece, it's a great place to visit. A beautiful destination.

**Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?**

**A:** We used to travel to London every Christmas. I sometimes loved it and other times not so much.

**Q: If you've ever gone away for the holidays, which was the best trip?**

**A:** We used to always go away when I was a kid with my family to London. Some of those trips were very memorable. Once I moved away from Greece to New York for college, I would usually go back to Thessaloniki where I grew up and spend my Christmas there. Christmas in Greece is very festive.

**Q: Do you have a knack for picking up new languages?**

**A:** I hope so! I am a native Greek and English speaker, but I also picked up Spanish in college and French in high school. I am practicing my French again in preparation for my retreat in Paris.

**Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?**

**A:** I am dying to visit Japan.

**Q: When you go away, what are some of your must-have items?**

**A:** Layers are important. And shoes that you can wear in the rain. For the most part, I like to travel light. I hate carrying heavy things.

**Q: What is your guilty pleasure when you're on the road?**

**A:** I go through phases, but I always love finding the best steak.

**Q: What kind of research do you do before you go away on a trip?**

**A:** I read as much as I can about basics that shouldn't be missed and then I go on a deep dive and try to find things that are more local and authentic. I always know I want to spend a lot of time exploring, so I make sure to know where to look before I go.

**Q: What is your best and/or worst vacation memory?**

**A:** It's probably my best and worst memory. A few years ago I was hired to teach acting in China. I went for two consecutive years and it was a great experience. One thing that I wasn't a huge fan of was when they told me that the meat served was mystery meat, so I ended up eating pears for as long as I was there. They were the best pears I've ever tasted.

For more from the reporter, visit [www.jaehakim.com](http://www.jaehakim.com).

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

### Airbnb bans model customer for life but mum on reasons

By Christopher Elliott  
King Features Syndicate

I've been an Airbnb user for nearly a decade with over 40 stays and positive reviews.

Recently, Airbnb abruptly removed my account, citing a vague "possible violation" of its Terms of Service.

I appealed, but the company doubled down, banning me for life without an explanation.

I'm baffled. What could I have done to warrant this? All I want is my account reinstated. Can you help me?

— Kevin Donovan, Reno, Nevada

**A:** Airbnb owes you and all of its customers transparency. Terminating an account without a clear explanation isn't just poor customer service; it undermines trust.

Airbnb's Terms of Service require users to follow its rules. If your account truly violated its policies, the company should have detailed the specific offense, provided evidence and offered a meaningful appeals process.

Airbnb didn't do any of these things except offer you a path to appeal. You did appeal, politely asking Airbnb to detail the nature of your offense. Instead, Airbnb sent you a vague reply denying you reinstatement again.

"We want to assure you that we reviewed your case thoroughly before reaching this conclusion," it assured you. "As such, we won't be able to offer you additional support on this matter at this time."

In other words, they're done with you, and they

won't answer any more of your questions.

So, what did you do?

Airbnb's Help Center vaguely warns that accounts may be removed for "safety risks, fraudulent activity or legal compliance."

I asked you about any possible violations, but you drew a blank. It looks like you were a model customer — and a repeat one at that.

Platforms like Airbnb use a lot of automation and artificial intelligence to flag potentially fraudulent activity, and I began to suspect that your case fell into this category.

There may be someone else with your name out there who violated Airbnb's Terms of Service, but it definitely wasn't you. Airbnb had obviously made a mistake.

A few years ago, my advocacy team was flooded with erroneous bans from Airbnb users. The company implemented new measures, including a more formal appeals

process that vastly reduced the number of false positives. Apparently, it still has some work to do.

A brief, polite email to one of the executive contacts at Airbnb might have helped you get around this erroneous ban. I publish their names, numbers and email addresses on my consumer advocacy site, [elliott.org](http://elliott.org).

I contacted Airbnb on your behalf. While the company quickly reinstated your account, it still hasn't explained your ban.

This is unacceptable. Airbnb needs to explain why it removed your account by mistake and what it has done to prevent this from happening again to you and other good Airbnb users.

I'm still waiting.

*Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at [elliott.org/help](http://elliott.org/help) or [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).*