



WEEKEND BREAK

Ostend: Beyond the beach

Boasting some of Belgium's best beaches, Ostend is often seen as a summer destination, but as **Angela Dansby** discovers, it's a vibrant, cultural and historical city that can be visited all year round

Bright red-orange, huge, crumpled rectangles are unmissable near the Ostend Pier. Like arty lighthouses, the sculptures, named *Rock Strangers*, represent the city as a cultural destination, not just home to five of Belgium's best beaches. Belgian painter James Ensor lived there for most of his life, where many of his works are displayed, and the city boasts contemporary art with Europe's largest collection of outdoor murals. It's also where American singer-songwriter Marvin Gaye spent 18 months in the early 1980s.

Ostend is sometimes referred to as Belgium's "City by the Sea". But, frankly, it is the only city on the sea, as all the other municipalities scattered along the country's 65km coastline are towns or villages with a fraction of its 72,000 inhabitants.

Ostend – Oostende in Dutch, Ostende in French – boasts 7km of sandy coastline that is lovely to walk year-round, but arguably more so in non-summer months with far fewer people (plus dogs are allowed October to April). A free ferry connects coastal strollers to the lesser-known neighbourhood of Oosteroever, or East Bank, where they can visit a fort built by Napoleon Bonaparte and a defensive line installed by Germans during the World Wars.

Ostend is easy to reach from Brussels by train or car in less than two hours. It even has an airport for travel to and from Spain, Greece, Turkey and Egypt. Here are plenty of reasons to make the trip.

Art

The house where expressionist and surrealist master James Ensor lived between 1917 and his death in 1949 is now a museum. The James Ensor House features the second largest collection of his paintings in the world (after Antwerp's Royal Museum of Fine Arts) and offers a free app walk with a ticket to 13 places in the city where the painter spent time. The museum, which expanded in 2020, also includes a reconstructed attic studio, eclectic living room and former souvenir shop. A handful of Ensor's works – along with those of other Flemish masters like Constant Permeke, Léon Spilliaert, Rik Wouters and Jean Brusselman – are also in the Mu.Zee (Museum by the Sea).

The Mu.Zee – the result of a 2009 merger between the Provincial Museum for Modern Art and Museum of Fine Arts – features modern (1860s to 1960s) and contemporary (1960s to date) Belgian art in a former department store. It even has old shopping carts to prove it!

Europe's largest art festival in public spaces, The Crystal Ship, anchored in Ostend in 2016. It is a curated collection of murals on external building walls, plus a few sculptures and installations, by renowned local and international artists. There are currently 71 works, including a mural of the late Belgian rock singer Arno, but the collection grows each year by 10-20 from new and returning artists. They are divided into three walking routes (Belle Epoque, City Centre and Oosteroever) of about 5-6km each or one 26km cycling route. A free ferry along the quay (Visserskaai) connects visitors to Oosteroever. A free app called Street Art Oostende provides information about the works and artists, and a Facebook messenger chatbot guides each route from Tourism Ostend (Monacoplein 2). Every April, a two-week festival allows visitors to ob-



serve artists at work.

Ostend is dotted with many outdoor sculptures, in part thanks to Beaufort Sculpture Park, a triennial for contemporary art that has been taking place since 2003 along the Belgian coast, featuring 40 public works. Striking examples of the seven in Ostend are *Monument for a Wullok*, a giant seashell at the end of the western breakwater; *Pillage of the Sea*, a stack of stone 'pillows' at the tidal point in the North Sea; and *Sorry in Leopold Park*, which takes a comical view of dog worship. Other stand-out sculptures are *Altar* and *Dansende Golven* (two big waves that look like a tree) on the beach and *De Zee (The Sea)*, also known as *Dikke (Fat) Mathille*, which is hard to miss near the casino (and used to be on it). *The Seamen's Monument* near the pier commemorates numerous fishermen who died at sea (it was also where the first lighthouse was built in Ostend in 1771).

Other notable works of art are in Fort Napoleon: its courtyard features 24 sculptures in an *Army of Angels* and a poem 'sculpture' in Dutch with metal letters. Recently installed are 10 miniature Napoleon sculptures by Isaac

“ Belgian painter James Ensor lived there for most of his life, where many of his works are displayed, and the city boasts contemporary art with Europe's largest collection of outdoor murals. ”



Above: *Rock Strangers*. Previous pages: the *Thermae Palace*

Cordal, who also created little men about to jump in Ostend and Brussels.

Architecture

Belgium's first two kings, Leopold I and II, are credited with developing Ostend. Leopold I built a wooden chalet on a sand dune as his royal summer residence. He also established a direct railway between Brussels and Ostend and a ferry line to Dover, UK. Leopold II further transformed the city, his favourite place of residence, into the "queen of Belgian seaside resorts". From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, he modernised it, adding the Casino Kursaal entertainment centre, Hippodrome Wellington horse racetrack, twin-towered Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, and Royal Galleries with a Venetian colonnade. He also laid plans for a large thermal spa 'institute' against the colonnade, which became known as the Thermal Palace, and added wooden stables in an eccentric Norwegian style as well as a walled Japanese garden.

In 1933, the stunning Thermae Palace Hotel was opened by King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth. It was badly damaged in World War II, so it was renovated in the 1990s into the four-star Belle Epoque hotel it is today, including the 380-metre-long Royal Galleries. The Venetian Galleries are now used for temporary exhibitions and dining.

Just along from the Thermae Palace Hotel is a controversial 1931 statue of Leopold II on horseback. Since the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, it has been increasingly targeted by protesters who say the monument legitimises the king's brutal rule in Congo, but there are currently no plans to replace it.

The Hippodrome Wellington, named after the first Duke of Wellington, doubles as a nine-hole golf course and horse-racing track: from the end of June to August, it hosts a race every Monday.

Other architectural gems in Ostend include its neoclassical railway station, built in 1913 under Albert I (it is particularly striking with the reflection of sailboats in the marina in front of it); the nearby neo-Gothic Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (sadly, its 1908 stained glass windows were destroyed during the two World Wars) and Villa Maritza, a private mansion dating back to 1885, one of the last-standing Belle Epoque buildings on Ostend's coastline. The latter was purchased in 2012 for heritage renovation. A 'Tasteful Heritage' walk, starting at Tourism Ostend, "puts forgotten architectural gems" back on a map that's free for tourists.

As for landscape architecture, the peaceful Japanese Garden Shen Kei Tai remains open to visitors on weekends and a floral clock made of about 20,000 flowering plants is timeless in front of Leopold Park. In the summer, the date is adjusted daily.



Fort Napoleon

Culture

The 1811 Fort Napoleon, the only one of three successfully built by Napoleon Bonaparte in the area, has an interesting audio guide with 20 stories covering about 200 years of history. It was occupied by German soldiers during the World Wars and in between by local lovers and museums, with the current one opening in 2000. It also has Belevings Brasserie, an indoor-outdoor lunch spot perfect for fish and chips and Belgian beer.

The Atlantic Wall (Atlantikwall) Raversyde is a well-preserved German military defensive line from the Aachen Battery (WWI) and Saltzwedel-neu Battery (WWII) that stretches along Ostend's coast. It's an indoor-outdoor



Ostend train station



The Thermae Palace's Venetian Galleries

“ He also laid plans for a large thermal spa ‘institute’ against the colonnade, which became known as the Thermal Palace, and added wooden stables in an eccentric Norwegian style as well as a walled Japanese garden. ”

museum (March to November) with more than 60 bunkers, open-air and underground passageways and observation and artillery posts. The restoration of Aachen Battery won the 2022 Europa Nostra Award for heritage. While these artefacts harken back to dark days, they are peacefully nestled amidst 50 hectares of greenery and dunes. Visitors can walk through time in about two hours, starting at Tourism Ostend.

The restored Ostend City Museum occupies the former summer palace of King Leopold I and Queen Louise-Marie, reliving the ‘golden age’ of the city and Belgian aristocracy. It includes travel posters, model ships and old photos, detailing Ostend’s maritime roots. The room where Belgium’s first queen died of tuberculosis in 1850 has been preserved and she ‘narrates’ an audio guide.

Maritime

The restored bow of the ship HMS Vindictive stands like an abandoned washing machine on the east bank of Ostend’s port close to where it

was sunk by the German navy in World War I, after the British unsuccessfully tried to use it to block German submarines from entering the North Sea.

Nearby are several eye-catching lighthouses, notably the blue and white Lange Nelle with two big waves and three neon orange and grey ones on the port’s eastern breakwater. The walkway to the latter lighthouses is lovely, and nearby Raversijde Beach is less crowded any time of year. The yellow Blue Accelerator, 500 metres off the breakwater, is a blue economy innovation and development platform that allows researchers to conduct a broad range of tests in real-life sea conditions. It’s like a giant periscope looking at the trio of lighthouses.

Ostend also has two restored Belgian naval ships: the Mercator, a three-masted sailboat built in 1932, and Amandine from 1960. Both are worth seeing from the outside and for maritime enthusiasts, inside. The Mercator made 41 voyages around the world before anchoring in Ostend’s harbour in 1964 as a museum ship. Museum Amandine opened in 1995 near the train station, but it is currently closed for renovation until year end.

Anno 1465 in Raversyde features four reconstructed fishermen’s houses from the medieval village Walravesijde, after which the neighbourhood is named. Visitors can peek inside these houses on special dates of the year. They are a throwback to the Early Middle Ages when Ostend was a small fishing village built on the east end (oost-einde) of an island called Testerep between the North Sea and a beach lake (it eventually gained a connection to the mainland).

Thornton Bank wind turbine park, which lies 30km off the coast, is visible from Raversyde. Its 54 turbines generate enough renewable energy for 300,000 families. Known as Belgium’s 11th province in the North Sea, the wind farm can be visited by cruise boat or speedboat with Captain Blue. The tour boat company also offers a range of other day excursions from fishing to luxury sailing.

Music

Marvin Gaye wrote and recorded his 1982 hit album *Midnight Love* in Ostend, which includes one of his most famous songs, *Sexual Healing*. The Motown prince and soul icon arrived there by boat in 1981, broken, broke and saddled with a cocaine addiction, at the invitation of concert promoter Freddy Cousaert. Gaye got back on track in Ostend and earned his first two Grammy Awards from the album he produced there. A memorial plaque is embedded in the paving outside the apartment building where he composed the song.

Today, visitors can retrace the steps of Gaye in Ostend in a “Midnight Love Tour” by app and foot. Walk to the places where he spent time healing such as his seafront apartment and Taverner Floride, and hear about his comeback and



The Seamen's Memorial

tunes. Also honouring Gaye is Casino Kursaal where he performed, which has a bronze sculpture of the singer sitting at his piano, and Galerie Beausite, which has a large photo of Gaye on Ostend beach.

The Casino Kursaal also has an impressive theatre and line-up of performing artists of national and international acclaim. For example, in early 2023, there will be performances by the

Brussels Philharmonic, Flemish band Meteoor and Irish steppers in Riverdance.

De Grote Post, a post office-turned-cultural centre, also offers musical and theatrical performances as well as art exhibitions. Outside it is distinguished by a green patina sculpture above its entrance of five angels. Inside, old telephone booths feature large photographs of Flemish creatives.

“ The restored bow of the ship HMS Vindictive stands like an abandoned washing machine on the east bank of Ostend’s port close to where it was sunk by the German navy in World War I. ”

Ostend in brief: events, restaurants, bars and hotels

SEE

Winter in the Park: This annual Christmas market in Leopold Park is one of the largest in Europe with a covered ice-skating rink, 200 Christmas trees, 50 chalet shops and 170,000 lights plus a light show in tunnel. The upcoming one will be from December 2 to January 8.

Ostend Film Festival: This Flemish film fest kicks off each new year, culminating in the presentation of the Jamies, online video awards, and the Ensors, the Flemish film and television awards. The next one will be from January 27 to February 3, 2023.

Theatre by the Sea: This July-August festival has theatrical and musical performances around the city, largely in English to accommodate multinational residents and visitors.

SAVOUR

Frenchette: A former chef at Bistro Mathilda now serves up world cuisine with local products via a sharing menu in an eclectic atmosphere.

Ocean: This seaside restaurant offers seafood from mussels and oysters to shrimp and fish fillets.

Bistro Mathilda: A gastronomic institution celebrated for some of the best Belgian seafood anywhere.

Savarin: On the main promenade facing the sea, it features artfully styled, multi-course meals.

Venetiaanse: Housed in the Belle Epoque Venetian Galleries, an elegant restaurant with Italian food inspired by the North Sea.

SIP

Café Botteltje: A cosy pub with a huge selection of Belgian beers, dishes made with them and flavours of genever.

Galerie Beausite: This art and design space featuring painted portraits of famous people is a lovely place for a glass.

KAAP: Next to the Royal Galleries, this art-

sy café with a seafront terrace has live music and art displays.

Max Consael Tearoom: This new, daytime café in Oosteroever is known for its waffles.

Zig Zag Art Bar: A gallery where you can eat and drink surrounded by contemporary art.

STAY

Andromeda: A four-star modern hotel near the casino in an excellent waterfront location.

Le Bassin: Near the train station, this three-star hotel is stylish and affordable, including a wine and cheese bar and two apartments for rent.

Huyze Elimonica: In a building dating back to 1899, this recently renovated bed and breakfast is within walking distance of the beach.

Thermae Palace: A heritage site going back to the Belle Epoque, the four-star hotel faces the beach and includes the Royal Galleries.

Upstairs: This industrial-looking, three-star hotel is ultra-modern and very good value.

