
A historic walk in Gent

by Agelandkaai

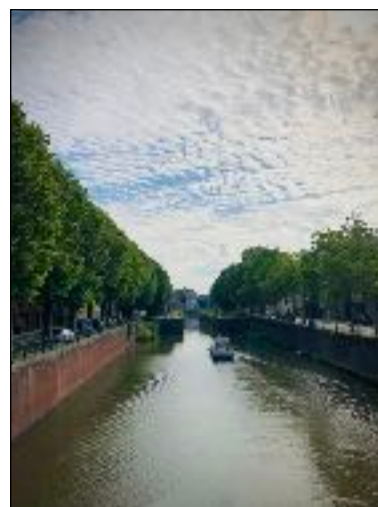


Introduction

I chose a number of historical highlights of our city. I try to frame the functions and significance of a number of beautiful buildings from Gent's past and really hope not to come across as pedantic. Ideally, I would just like to describe the atmosphere in the neighborhoods but that may not be possible without also providing some historical background. Of course I cannot resist the temptation to give a century now and then but that is mainly to illustrate how far the city goes back into time.

The walk in itself is fun, the historical explanations you can feel free to read diagonally or not. I have indicated in bold the most important buildings so that you can step from monument to monument if necessary and omit the reading.

Underlined words and titles in [blueberry](#) are links to Google Maps, or sites to book your [tickets](#). The title shows a part of the walk.



[The Macharius district and the confluence of Leie and Schelde.](#)

Our house is situated close to the oldest urban core around which the city of Gent arose. The canal at our house ends in the marina on the Leie (Portus Ganda). Later, at the marina you'll see the confluence of the Leie and the Schelde. We cross the Napoleon De Pauw bridge and arrive at Macharius.

This neighbourhood used to be the Spanish Castle, Charles V had this castle build to keep an eye on the rioting city of Gent after his troops demolished the [abbey of St. Bavo](#). The names of the streets in this quarter indicate foreign occupation from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. At the end of [Buitenhof](#), you'll see some remains from the monk's brewery.



The Celtic word for mouth or estuary is Ganda, so immediately this explains the town name. This is where St. Amandus founded St. Bavo's Abbey in the 7th century. The ruins are scattered here and there in the Macharius neighbourhood and through a gate in Coyendans Park you can visit [St. Bavo's Abbey](#) on weekends.

While passing the [Slachthuisbrigde](#) you have a nice view over the confluence of the Leie and the Schelde. Walk on & towards [the little pedestrian bridge](#), and there you have the confluence of the two rivers.

The Schelde becomes an impressive stream beyond Gent, but here a rather still and quiet river. This is because new locks around Gent at the newly constructed Ring canal in the 1960s control the river's water balance.

Continue walking along the Schelde via the Bisdomkaai and head towards the next bridge. Cross the [bridge](#), and here you can already see the [Geeraard de Duivelsteen](#), and the Braemgaten, under the Laurentplein.



[St. Bavo's Square](#)

At [Coupure](#) you can rent a boat, and emerge here, next to Geerard de Duivelsteen, from under the Laurentplein, through the Braemgaten.

The [Geerard de Duivelsteen](#) is an impressive medieval building from the 14th century of a curious knight who wanted to have his son killed, according to an urban legend. In the building you can certainly take a look, many European and American film crews have passed here because the interior breathes the Middle Ages. Probably this building was part of the defense of the oldest port here from the 9th century.



From here head towards the cathedral, and you'll pass the [Maaseikplein](#). In this oasis, pear trees, apple trees, a fig tree, a cherry tree, an almond tree and a mulberry tree grow. Varieties such as bedstraw, wild strawberries and madonna lilies also bloom colorfully and fragrantly. Many of the plant species that were given a place here can also be found in the famous painting by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck. In this park you can picknick, try the trampoline or even leapfrog with the wooden lamb, also a reference to the Mystic Lamb.



In the middle of [St. Bavo's Square](#), you can see the Cloth Hall, above it the [Belfry](#), the New Gent Theatre ([NTG](#)) and [St. Bavo's Cathedral](#). The [Belfry](#) is a **tower** where the city guards could see enemy troops from afar and they sounded the alarm. The panoramic view of the city was also important for fire detection. Many houses were made of wood and a fire could destroy the entire city. The tower is 95 m high and built in the 14th century. Dragon above! You can climb the **tower** and visit the museum attached to it.



[St. Bavo's Cathedral](#) dates back to the 12th century, only downstairs in the crypts are the remains of the old church. What we see is a new building from the 15th - 16th century, completed in 1559.

The outside is medieval, known as the Gothic style, the inside is 17th century. The 16th century was a century of religious wars between the Catholics and the Protestants and so the Protestants destroyed the interior. So the interior is built in the typical 17th century art style that we call Baroque.

The Gent altarpiece "[The Adoration of the Lamb of God](#)" can be visited here. The altarpiece is here since 1432. It was painted by Jan and Hubert van Eyck.



In total there are 20 painted panels.

Exterior

You see a kneeling man in a very rich suit and on the right a chic woman, that is the couple Vijdt-Borluut. They were the commissioners of this gigantic altarpiece. They had a private chapel here and thought that through this painting would get them intercession at the end of time.

On the left we see John the Baptist, he points to the Mystic Lamb, and that is the core of the polyptych. The Lamb of God is Christ and in his form sacrificing himself for us. He sacrifices himself for our sins.

On normal days only the closed side was visible, the front was only visible on high days, like Christmas or Easter.

Interior

At the top left we see Adam, notice how he wants to step out of the painting with his foot.

The painting has had a very rich voyage during time, it was sold, robbed, even some parts were cut in two. After the first World War, by the Treaty of Versailles it was a part of the negotiations. And after the Second World War it was found in a Salt Mine in Austria with a lot of other European masterpieces.



The movie 'The Monuments Men' (can be found in the Infuse app on the Apple TV, in the Movies folder) is based on the true story of a group of soldiers in World War II who were tasked by Franklin D. Roosevelt to redraw artwork from the clutches of Nazi thieves and return them to their owners. This movie gives a good view on the history of this painting. It is exceptional that such a big painting is brought together.

The large center panel depicts the sacrifice of the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself for the salvation of humanity, he was crucified), who gives his blood for the salvation of humanity. From the four corners of the earth, crowds of holy men and women gather around the spectacle. The left-hand panels show the knights, the judges, while the right-hand panels show the hermits and pilgrims.

You see a detailed landscape, with a perfect perspective. On the horizon is a medieval city.

The eternal father or god looks down from above and is flanked by Mary and John (relatives of Jesus Christ). Next to them we have singing and music-

making angels (is a supernatural, intellectual being found in several (often monotheistic) religions) and Adam and Eve, the fittest human beings.

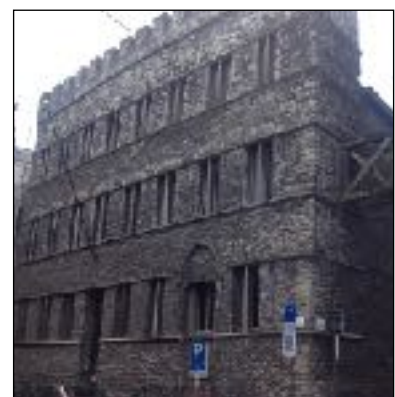
On the closed panels we see the benefactors Judocus Vijdt and his wife Elisabeth Borluut in sumptuous costumes (green silk, scarlet, fur...). She is 66 years old and has no wrinkles.... a distinguished lady. At the back of the altarpiece we see a view of Gent.

The painting technique is oil paint on wooden oak panels. So oil painting is applying several layers of transparent paint on top of each other and at the end you get a brilliant optics. You can even look at the painting with a magnifying glass and see the smallest details. There are 42 different flowers painted, and the texture of the clothing and jewelry is painted to perfection.

The Bekering van St. Bavo by the famous 17th century painter Pieter Paul Rubens. Above we see the entrance into the monastery of St Bavo. We see the typical dramatic style of Rubens. Probably his daughter almost had a heart attack because he gives all his valuable possessions to the poor on the stairs. Her entire estate is gone. Humor lurks in every corner of a Rubens painting.



[An extra worthwhile little detour](#)



[Side-step to De VOORUIT](#)

We start again on [St. Bavo's Square](#), but because now we go where Google Maps doesn't go, underneath a city palace. Look for this house, and go in thru the gate. have a look inside, or have a drink at the [Hof van Herzele](#), behind it is a little courtyard, not know to most tourists.



Turn to the [right](#), go underneath the houses, and you'll arrive at Mageleinstraat, from where you can follow Google Maps [again](#). On this short walk, you should see the 3th picture on this page.

Walk the Mageleinstraat, Koestraat and follow the Kortedagsteeg and the Walpoort to the Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat.

There we find the monumental party room of [De Vooruit](#).



As an aside, info on the Forward: Since the third quarter of the 19th century, bread prices had skyrocketed. In order to do something about this the socialists of Genk met in a pub. In that inn there was a bread oven and that's probably why they had the idea to start baking their own bread. The quality of the bread was better and it appealed to the taste of the workers. So the socialists became bakers. From the original association "De Vrije Bakkers" (1873) the "De Vooruit" was born in 1881.

'Buy big, sell small' was the slogan.

You bought 'bonnekes' (coupons) from the messenger who went from door to door by bicycle (luxury) and gave the Vooruit money a week in advance to buy grain and other foodstuffs. So you paid in advance. If the Vooruit made a profit, you



would get extra 'bonnekes'. You could even become part owner by buying vouchers or shares.

A coöperative is a type of business where the members can also be owners. Buying on the poof was an ailment that put workers permanently in debt. So the Forward turned the system around and lived on the credit of its members.

Thanks to the profits, it was now possible to buy a private room, a people's house. And this became the hub around which club life could revolve: trade unions, mutual health organizations, youth clubs, women's groups, the harmony... and the party. From cradle to grave, the worker was immersed in the socialist universe.

The Vooruit became huge by expanding into the banking sector, real estate, shipping, cotton plantations in the colonies...

This 'workers palace', as De Vooruit administrators called the project, had to rise here, amidst and competing with the bourgeois entertainment. In 1910 the coöperative's resident architect Ferdinand Dierkens was given the difficult task of building a home for Vooruit's numerous cultural associations on the narrow, steep site between St.-Pietersnieuwstraat and Muinkschelde. He divided the plot in two and designed a ballroom for 1600 spectators and a cinema for 1000 spectators. On the street side there would be a café, a popular restaurant, several 'boardrooms', a library and a sports hall.



A glazed winter garden connected front and rear buildings. The cooperative's name still flaunts on the yellow brick side walls. The letters are down to hundreds meters away visible.



Innovative techniques and materials such as concrete, iron and glass were used to build the immense palace. Nevertheless, front and back facade were given a somewhat overloaded, bourgeois character by adding classical decorations reminiscent of the Grand Bazzars.



Except for a one-time Wagner performance, little came of the people-lifting dream. In the main auditorium after World War I, film projections were particularly successful.



Socialist associational life spread to the neighborhood public houses in the working-class neighborhoods. After World War II, the heyday of the socialist counterculture was over.

Vooruit opened the new coöperative warehouses at the Festival Palace in 1956.

Lack of money prevented the entire interior from being adapted to its new function. In 1982, the badly neglected Feestpaleis was saved from demolition by the young team of the now over-known Arts Center. It is truly a thriving center for the performing arts.



It is a very nice eating and reading café and has had a very nice terrace for a number of years.



[The Kouter](#)

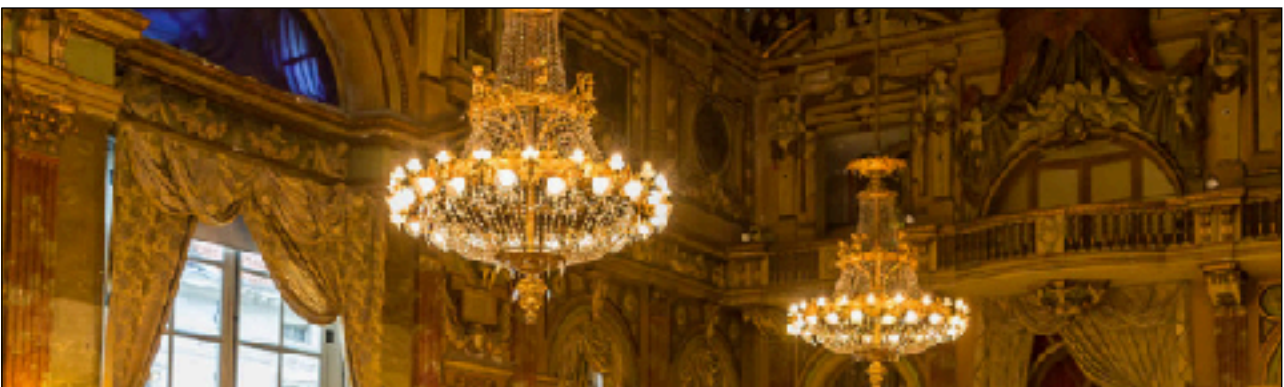
This square is best known for its Sunday morning flower market, at the feet of the kiosk where an orchestra also plays (in non-covid!!!). The flower market has been going on since 1772, when one Toontje Verstuyft started putting flowers outside. The petals "Mystic Leaves" (Jessica Diamond) incorporated into the square refer to the many flowers and plants painted in the Lamb of God.



A number of monumental buildings still exude the atmosphere of the 18th century, when this square was truly 'Place m'as-tu-vu'. Think of women in domed skirts and carriages. The dark orange colored building [Hotel Falligan](#) has one of the most beautiful Gent rococo interiors in the city. Definitely worth a visit and there are regular exhibitions. Gent is known for its own equivalent of rococo, the 18th century art style of the nobility and the wealthy that exudes frivolity and lightness. Similar buildings can still be found in many places in the city.

Opposite, you have the [Handelsbeurs](#) where there is now Brasserie Ha and you can enjoy very tasty dishes of French-Belgian cuisine. Go towards the Schouwburgstraat and you can still feel the 19th century opera atmosphere.

[The Flemish Opera](#) is located here, a unique opera with again a breathtaking interior. The gigantic entrance was specially designed to let the guests in dry, the carriages could enter and leave the building without much traffic chaos. The street of the opera is one of the best preserved neoclassical facades in Gent.



Graslei

On the way to Graslei, you'll pass the Old Palace of Justice.

The Graslei is where the grain port was located in the 11th century. You can certainly recognize Gent's rich past here in the many guild houses that have been preserved along the Leie. Gent enjoyed the privilege of the stacking right, so a quarter of the grain that was transported on the Leie and the Scheldt was claimed by the city. It was stacked for 2 weeks and then sold to local bakers and brewers.

The oldest house here, recognizable by its gray limestone and typical Romanesque round-arched windows is [Het Spijker](#). The building dates back to 1200 and was a grain store. The building leans forward a bit which made it easier to hoist tones filled with grain to the top.



The other buildings belonged mainly to the trades: masons, boatmen, brewers... "Art style fanatics" can indulge in recognizing the various architectural styles such as Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Classicism. The large building on the corner is the old post office building in neo-Gothic style, erected for the 1913 World's Fair. The building now houses a shopping center on the lower and second floors, at the very top there is a [hotel and cocktail bar](#). The interior of the second floor is a gem of industrial design from the early 20th century, this is where the various ticket offices were located.



Korenmarkt

You can go via the Hooiaard or also along the Post to the Korenmarkt. As the name indicates, grain (koren in dutch) was traded here. But it is also a place where the people flocked in troubled times and during festivities. Revolts of artisans started here or on the [Vrijdagmarkt](#). The Flemish count Louis van Male organized major knightly tournaments here in 1376 and 1377. All the knights of Flanders and European nobility and royalty came here for this medieval grand prix. The square's rectangular shape is ideal for such spectacles.

Again, the oldest house is identified by its gray limestone, the Borluut Stone. It dates back to 1175. The [Borluut](#) family was a wealthy noble family that held important administrative positions in Gent from the 13th to 16th centuries. Jan van Borluut fought against France in the 1302 Battle of the Golden Spurs. A battle that the county of Flanders won against the strongest knightly war of the time.



Since 2017, there are also two vertical artworks on the market. At the Hema you have the *Brooch* by the Turkish artist Ayse Erkman. A shimmering gold chain on which the links are shaped like windows of medieval buildings from Gent. The 19 m high beam at the Sint-Niklaas church is *HD 400* by Ann Veronica Janssens. The shadow of the beam and reflection of the polished side seem to follow each other. On 1 May at 4 pm they will meet and be in each other's line of sight. Gent is the city of rising socialism in Belgium and May 1 was certainly not chosen by chance.

We are facing the imposing [St. Nicholas Church](#), built since 1200 and this church of the boatmen served as a belfry, a watchtower for signaling fires and enemy troops.

In [Du Progres](#), the black building with its neoclassical facade, you can taste magnificent dishes of Belgian cuisine. Highly recommended. We normally have steak here with James Bond sauce, cream sauce with whiskey, peppers and estragon. So good!

The [belfry](#) in the distance is a building of 1377. The dragon on the spire is one of the symbols of the city. The bells in the tower (including the famous Klokke Roeland) signaled the beginning and end of a working day, rang at feasts, storms, fires and other dangers.

Notice the coins here and there also in the road surface. They lie on the site of the old trade route between Bruges and Cologne that ran right through Gent in the Middle Ages.

[Gravensteen](#)

Now go back via the Hooiaard to the Gravensteen. You pass the [Great Butchers' Hall](#). The sale of meat could only take place there. Those who did not comply were sentenced to death. In the building you can now taste local East Flemish specialties. On the [Groentenmarkt](#) you will still find many stores selling all kinds of Belgian, Flemish and Gent specialties: French fries, [neuzekes](#) (cuberdons), bread and pastries, mustard and spices. There's something for everyone, the little house with terrace on the corner on the way to the bridge is ['t Galgenhuisje](#), a tiny café with lots of local beers.



Walk towards the [Sint Veerleplein](#) and you will arrive at [the castle of the Counts of Flanders](#).

It was built in 1180 under Count Philip of Alsace, count of Flanders and crusader, on the model of the Krak des Chevaliers in Syria. For many generations it was one of the residences of the counts and countesses of Flanders. In the 14th century they had a more comfortable princely court

built further up, a very interesting area to explore around the [Prinsenhof](#). It would be too extensive here if I gave you information about the many small streets in and around the Prinsenhof.



In the following centuries the Castle of the Counts received other functions: a court building, a cotton factory with workers' quarters in and against the building. The building was fully restored in the late 19th century and served as the showpiece for the 1913 World's Fair. Those who yearn for stories of knights and countesses or even rebellious students should definitely visit this moated castle. Pretty unique to have such a castle in the middle of the city.

Walk further to the [Kraanlei](#). If you take one of the alleys on the left, you will come to the Patershol. The name [Patershol](#) refers to the shoddy Carmelites (fathers) who built their monastery there. It is a labyrinth of medieval alleys. In the Middle Ages, this district was reserved for the wealthy (nobility, clergy, law firms). But in the 19th century and much of the 20th century, this was a neighborhood for the poorer population of Gent. This district became the neighborhood of the less fortunate, the streets were filled with pimps, hoodlums, prostitutes and fliers. Today it is back in the hands of the rich.



Walking further along [Kraanlei](#) you will see on the left a house with dormers: [the Kinderen Alijns Godshuis](#) (hospice for hospital for poor, sick people). It was built in 1363 as compensation for the murder of the Alijn brothers by the Reym brothers because of an amorous affair. Our own Romeo and Juliet story here in Gent:

Sometime in the middle of the 14th century, a young fuller named Hendrik Alijn lived in Gent. He was head over heels in love with Godelieve, a rich weaver's daughter. But the fullers and the weavers were mortal enemies in the Middle Ages... So Godelieve's father thought that a marriage was out of the question. He himself had chosen a Simon Rijn as candidate for marriage: a rich patrician, also from the weavers' guild. But Godelieve was not to be tampered with. She rejected Simon Rijn. Hurt by the rejection and stirred up by the age-old feud between the weavers and the fullers, Simon Rijn sought revenge. Accompanied by his brother and some gang members, he went to St. John's Church (now St. Bavo's Cathedral) - and during the church service he killed his rival Hendrik Alijn, his brother Seger and a servant.

Then, still covered in blood, he sought Godelieve out, and forced her to flee with him. Simon Rijn, however, was immediately pursued and had to leave his beloved behind. Godelieve thus remained out of the grip of her captor. She retreated to the beguinage. Simon Rijn and his 12 accomplices were sentenced to eternal banishment. As penance, the family of the murderers had to found a house of worship for the needy sick. (<https://persblog.be/stad-moord-op-liefdesrivaal-legde-basis-van-huis-van-alijn/>)

The hospice is now the [House of Alijn](#), a museum of folklore. If you want to see your old bedroom from the 1980s again, it is there that you should be. Highly recommended and the museum is the top in terms of audience engagement and creativity.



Then take the first [small bridge](#) on the right. On the left you will see many buildings that refer to the period of the industrial revolutions: warehouses, remnants of spinning mills... After all, Gent was the first city on the continent to jump on the industrial train and was long regarded as the Manchester of the continent. The city is known for its textile industry. On another tour, you might be interested in exploring Gent's industrial past: the cradle of industry, the era of the textile barons, the workers' bellhops that sprung up like mushrooms, the oldest factories... Just walk straight ahead, on you'll arrive at [Vrijdagmarkt](#).

Vrijdagmarkt

Since 1199 a market has been held here every Friday, without exception, even during the world wars.

Traders and guilds settled here, as you can see from the many beautiful houses. In the middle of the square stands [Jacob Van Artevelde](#). He was the leader of the weavers in the mid- 14th century who sided with England during the Hundred Years War between England and France. Jacob points to England and wants to say that this is his real king. After all, Edward III had proclaimed himself king of France here in 1340. The fact that the count of Flanders sided with France was much against the will of many citizens of Gent and Jacob van Artevelde

then cast himself as the leader of the opposition to the count and the French king. This episode ended when Jacob was murdered with a chopping axe in his own garden.

Originally, only products related to textiles were traded here: fabrics, needles, scissors, knives, dyes, looms and spinning wheels. Eventually the range of products increased and today you can buy the tastiest fish and fruit here on a Friday morning. The fruit store on the corner by the tower is one of the best in Gent.



Furthermore, here we can also see the monumental building of [Bond Moyson](#), the first electrically lit building in Gent. In 1897 de Vooruit opened a building on the Vrijdagmarkt. Architect Ferdinand Dierkens was commissioned to erect a building for a shoe store, clothing and fabric store, as well as a grocery store and various workshops. Dierkens opted for a completely new building inspired by the Grands Magasins of Paris. It is the first electrically lit building in Gent with an elevator. The large window on the right side offered a view of a monumental cast iron Art Nouveau staircase connecting the galleries. The imposing crowing rooster on the facade is the subject of a persistent legend. It is said to have been donated by Walloon workers in gratitude for the 10,000 loaves of Vooruit during the 1886 riot. However, no source can confirm the donation of the cockerel. The crowing rooster probably symbolizes the light that dispels the darkness. Below the cock we see other symbols: the three eights (the demand of the labour movement to divide a 24-hour period into 8 hours of work, 8 hours of rest and 8 hours of relaxation) and the anchor, symbol of hope.

If you are in the mood for a beer then definitely go to the [Dulle Griet](#), hundreds of Belgian and international beers are available. At De Dulle Griet they have come up with a nice concept since a few years, which especially attracts many tourists. They have had their own coachman's glass (a beer glass without a base with a wooden stand) made that holds 1.2 liters of beer. When you order the glass, you have to hand in your shoe. Your left or your right, it doesn't matter. The waiter puts your shoe in a basket that is then carried by a rope towards the ceiling.



If you want to eat something tasty, the [Keizershof](#) is the place to be. It offers a lot of Belgian classics: sole, salmon, stew, shrimp croquettes, steak...

[At Saint James](#)

The [St. James church](#) has its origins in the 11th century, which we can still see on the west facade (the facade with the portal) with its round-arched windows. Over the centuries, the church has been expanded, restored and rebuilt several times. The Gothic style can be seen in the large pointed arched windows and the Baroque is certainly noticeable in the interior.

At the foot of the church, a flea market is held on Friday, Saturday and Sunday mornings (8am to 2pm). The stallholders and traders of "Bij Sint-Jacobs" are proud of their oldest flea market in Belgium where you can buy antiques, bric-a-brac, curiosities and all sorts of second-hand items. Many ordinary citizens of Ghent also browse the market and meet up there.

It's great fun to soak up the atmosphere of the square and have a drink or a bite to eat in the adjoining terraces.

One stop you still might like to make, is to visit [Vits-Staelens](#), which is a peculiar herb & spices shop. All herbs & spices are alfabetically organised. Worth a look inside.

And from here, it's just a small walk [home](#), this walk is via the Baudelopark, but you can go shorter.

Hope you enjoyed our tour.

Jurgen & Tom

