

RETAIL / BELGIUM

Rising star

Ghent is earning itself a reputation as a retail haven, especially among those hunting for quirky or one-off pieces. We meet the designers and shop owners who call Belgium’s third city home.

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Ask a Belgian where to go clothes-shopping and they’ll point to Antwerp – home to The Royal Academy and a host of seasoned fashion designers – or perhaps Brussels. But, in the world of retail, sometimes the brightest ideas spring up in quieter places, where rent is cheaper and young people can afford to take risks. That’s why Ghent is ripe for discovery. A mere 30-minute train trip from the capital, this Flemish city exudes a fairytale charm: gothic churches, ornate townhouses, cobbled streets and quaint canals populate the city centre. Near the water, on streets such as Brabantdam, you’ll find the city’s top fashion outposts. While Ghent attracts tourists all year round, most of the customers tend to be students from Ghent University, well-heeled families who’ve called the city home for generations and daytrippers from Brussels or Antwerp looking for newer finds. Here are the shops worth a visit.



1. Twiggy Men’s and womenswear

Barbara Beernaert (*pictured*) was destined for a career in fashion. Her mother was a designer with her own label, Pascal Daniel, plus a multi-brand clothes shop, Twiggy, that she opened in Ghent in 1974. Beernaert helped manage the shop before taking the reins in the early 2000s. Pascal Daniel folded but Twiggy has been going from strength to strength ever since.

In 2011, Beernaert bought a 19th-century former office building near the canal, south of the city centre. Ghent-based firm Architecten de Vylder Vinck Taillieu restored the structure, adding a new wing and removing certain floors so that several rooms now boast soaring ceilings. The result is a beguiling and labyrinthine space: stairs snake here and there, while mirrors and hidden doors throw you off course just as you think you’ve found the way to that colourful coat.

Beernaert, who is eager for her clients to lose themselves in the joy of shopping, has sorted all items by colour rather than brand. “We don’t want someone to buy Isabel Marant just because it’s Isabel Marant,” she says. “We want people to explore.” Beernaert looks for the rare and refined, choosing pieces she would want to wear herself. Women’s wares includes dresses from Finland’s Samuji and jackets by Parisian designer Vanessa Seward, while men’s choices span Italy’s Aspesi and Japan’s Still By Hand. There’s also a selection of furniture from Artek. A few years ago, Beernaert turned the courtyard into a Mediterranean-style café and she has big things planned. Mum would be proud. *twiggy.be*

Best for: Stocking up on A-grade staples.
We’d buy: Aspesi denim workman’s jacket and Roberto Collina green jumper for men; Samuji white dress for women.

2. Loft Eyewear

“Antwerp would have been too logical, too easy,” says Tom Buysse (*pictured*), when asked why he chose to open his eyewear shop in Ghent. Buysse studied optometry in Brussels and in 2016 opened Loft, a high-end eyewear label and multi-brand optician, in a modest but elegant space on Henegouwenstraat (a long and excellent retail stretch south of the centre). His goal was simple: offer the city something it was lacking. In Ghent, eyewear choice is limited to your usual international giants, so Buysse has selected stellar niche labels such as Oscar Magnuson from Stockholm and Paris’s Anne & Valentin. Loft also produces its own exclusive models in tandem with Berlin brand Mykita, with more collaborations on the way. *loftoptiek.com*

Best for: Investing in a special pair of specs or sunnies.
We’d buy: Metal-rimmed spectacles from Loft × Mykita collaboration and Gamine thick red sunglasses.



3. Jodevisscher Men’s and womenswear

Imagine a label that can’t be found anywhere else, the designer of which will repair your trousers 10 years down the line and share a coffee and a laugh with you between fittings. A dream from yesteryear? Not in Ghent. Walk into Jo De Visscher’s eponymous shop on any day of the week and you’ll find the designer downstairs in the studio, examining textiles and drawing patterns for the new collection.

Formerly an art restorer, De Visscher learnt her trade by taking fashion-design classes after work. For a decade now she’s been dressing men and women in refined, nostalgic designs fit for Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan. Think wide pleated trousers, Riviera polo shirts and loose-fitting dresses, all of which are made in the Czech Republic. The materials – heavy cotton, translucent linen – mainly hail from Italy, Spain and Portugal; the colours are distinctive, skewing towards pastels for men and brighter shades for women. The shop also sells pieces from other covetable Belgian designers, such as men’s brogues by Nathalie Verlinden. *jodevisscher.be*

Best for: Understated old-school pieces.
We’d buy: Grey cotton shirt and Nathalie Verlinden brogues for men; dark blue silk dress for women.



4. Rue Blanche Womenswear

Rue Blanche has been a staple in Belgian women’s wardrobes for decades. Marie-Chantal Regout opened her first shop in Brussels in 1987 and it wasn’t long before a Ghent outpost (*pictured below*) followed. In 2016, after three decades at the helm, Regout handed over to her daughters Astrid and Aude (*pictured*). “My mother doesn’t work with inspiration; she just creates clothes she wants to be in,” says Aude. That means you can expect pieces such as high-waisted, pleated trousers with chunky buttons; cashmere knits in bright colours; and long overcoats in bold checks, made primarily in Eastern Europe with fine Japanese and Italian fabrics. The sisters are keen to maintain Madame Regout’s time-honoured style but they also want to make their own mark on the label. As such they have recruited Russian designer Lena Loginova to bring a fresh eye to proceedings; her first collection will launch this autumn. *rueblanche.com*

Best for: Simple, well-made womenswear.
We’d buy: Merino pullover in forest green, Raffia handbag and a sand-coloured viscose-linen dress.



5. Apuura Homeware and womenswear

In 1992, art school dropout Katrien Buyle started selling handmade lampshades and notebooks from a small space on Onderbergen, just across the road from where her shop stands today. Over the past 26 years her collection has grown to include furniture, ceramics, dresses, carpets and bed linen. The name Apuura acknowledges the shop’s pursuit of purity (*puur* means pure in Dutch) in both design and manufacturing. Everything is designed by Buyle and handmade by artisans around the world, whether that’s porcelain in Japan or cashmere throws in India. In defiance of mass-manufacturing, Buyle only produces up to 12 pieces of each item. There are many charming products to choose from, including a small selection of womenswear by external designers such as Scandinavia’s Norr. *apuura.com*

Best for: Charming homeware, floaty dresses and cosy knits.
We’d buy: Rattan armchair, a linen bed throw and a summer floral dress in blue.



6. Oorcussen Womenswear

The 1990s were an inspiring period for Belgian fashion: the “Antwerp Six”, graduates from the Royal Academy that included Dries Van Noten and Walter Van Beirendonck, had taken the fashion world by storm and suddenly everyone was talking about Belgium. “It was a good time to do something new,” says Caroline Naudts, who opened her multi-brand fashion shop in 1992.

Oorcussen is an old Flemish word and the name of a bar that occupied the shop’s site in the 1600s. The current building does not date back to that era but it’s still impressive, with stained-glass windows that pour brilliant colours over clothes from Belgian designers including AF Vandervorst, Christian Wijnants and Sofie D’Hoore. Naudts is expanding the selection in a more international direction with hard-to-find labels such as Italy’s Sara Lanzi. This is a practical decision: her knowledgeable customers are looking for something they can’t find elsewhere, and the presence of a few off-piste labels helps business. After all, running a shop here is not all smooth sailing. “It’s difficult; you might do well one season and then the next it’ll be completely different,” she says. *oorcussen.be*

Best for: Statement designs by Belgian heavyweights.
We’d buy: Dries Van Noten patterned dress, Sofie D’Hoore sandals and an Ann Demeulemeester black handbag.