

# TRAVEL

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## New life in the port Einstein left

In [Belgium](#) [History](#) By Kristin Conard

Between 1873 and 1934, millions of Europeans passed through the museum – then the medical and administrative warehouses where third-class passengers were inspected for disease – before embarking on a 10 day voyage to the United States, with many ending up at New York City’s [Ellis Island](#). The famed fleet was used by Russian Jews to escape persecution in the 1890s and Europeans Jews escaping the rising Nazi party in the early 1930s. One of the most famous passengers was Albert Einstein, who left Europe in 1933 on the Red Star Line’s (RSL) *Westernland* and wrote his resignation letter to the Prussian Academy for the Sciences on ship stationary.

Today, the museum features exhibits, artefacts and films that detail the migrant experience from departure to arrival in the United States (Einstein’s letter is on display until early 2014).

Visitors can also dig into their own family history in the museum’s database and climb up the observation tower – built in the shape of a RSL bow and chimney – for an expansive view over Antwerp and the Scheldt River.

But the museum is just one of the iconic institutions that call the former shipping zone home. In addition to the [Royal Ballet of Flanders](#) and the [Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Flanders](#), there is the [Museum aan de Stroom](#) (MAS), or Museum on the Stream, which opened in 2011 and stands on the border between Het Eilandje and the rest of the city – its 10 storeys of red sandstone and undulating glass panes housing a diverse art collection. Upon entering each floor, you pass through a “Sensory Room”, where music and images immerse you in the theme of that floor, from incredible pre-Columbian artefacts to the World Port exhibition, with ship models, film clips and old maps.

Fine dining has also started appearing in the neighbourhood. Michelin-starred [‘t Zilte restaurant](#) is located on the ninth floor of MAS, where Chef Viki Geunes creates sophisticated, small portions are served in a sleek and modern setting. With a menu influenced by local seafood

and innovative taste combinations, you can try dishes such as North Sea crab with cucumber, sprouts and algae, or lobster with juniper and hazelnut butter.

Felix Pakhuis, a beautifully renovated warehouse from the 1860s that houses the city archives, also houses the trendy The Living restaurant on its ground floor, with retro style furnishings and a large terrace. Opened in 2009, it serves Belgian favourites like mussels and it also has one of the best buffet brunch spreads in the city with a sprawling feast of options including bacon and eggs, soup, pastries, pies and salads. The Pakhuis also has a cafe and market section, Markt, opened in 2012, where you can order from a changing menu of local and seasonal meats, breads and cheeses, along with wine, coffee and more.

With the mighty Scheldt River playing such an important role in Het Eilandje, it makes sense that there would be a way to get wet. The Badboot, opened in August 2012, is the world's largest floating pool, located on a docked boat anchored in the Kattendijk dock. In the summer you can swim in the 120m pool, while during winter it is set up for ice skating.

Despite its new museums and eateries, there is still more transformation to come. New residential buildings are in the works, as is the expansion of green space with a park near the Red Star Line Museum to be completed in the next few years. And the piece de resistance: In 2015, Havenhuis, or the Port Authority Headquarters, designed by legendary Zaha Hadid Architects, will open in 2015. The modern architectural marvel – an elaborate, angular glass walled building set between the city and the harbour – will help fully establish Het Eilandje as a world-class destination yet again.

### **Practicalities**

Guided walking tours are available through the Antwerp tourism bureau, including “Touring Around (And In) MAS”, where visitors can learn about the development, design and architecture of the Het Eilandje neighbourhood with a stop at the MAS. Flandria Boat runs harbour cruises starting at the docks. You can even find your way to the area as the migrants once did, using the Red Star Line Walkumentary smartphone app. Many emigrants arrived in Antwerp's Central Station and would make their way in crowds of up nearly 3,000 to the port 3km away. The app helps you trace a similar path with maps, short videos and stories that tell the history of the area as you go.