



IN THE KNOW

The Art Deco Brussels 2025 program runs until December 31 at various locations across the city.

brussels.be

Explore Brussels operates a variety of tours, some of which specialise in architecture and design.

explore.brussels

BELvue Museum is running Art Deco tours for €7 (\$12) a person.

belvue.be

Renaissance Tours has a Singapore: Art Deco to Art Now trip on January 22-28 led by Claudia Chan Shaw; \$8250 a person, twin-share.

renaissancetours.com.au

architect Victor Horta's flagship Centre for Fine Arts, a city-within-a-city built between 1919-1928 and marked by glass ceilings, sweeping staircases, undulating concrete balconies and an egg-shaped concert hall with parquet floor. Next to the information desk, a sheet of marbled glass in a metal rimmed door has a taped-over crack. "We're trying hard to find a match," says an assistant.

Outside, across the road, is Central Station, Horta's last work, distinguished by its gigantic elliptical facade dotted with fluttering Belgian and EU flags. Under a ceiling of glass bricks in the central hall, I spot a coffee bar called Melbourne tucked behind a curving granite booth. I buy a flat white from a barista who tells me it's Aussie-owned, then head out to take a tram to the Van Buuren Museum, 30 minutes away, having pre-booked a slot.

David Van Buuren was a Dutch banker whose art collection, acquired with his wife, Alice Piette, presents a stellar overview from the 15th to 20th century. There are paintings by Belgian and international masters and a huge chandelier by Jan Eisenloeffel that the Van Buurens bought at the expo and, after the house was built in 1928 by Brussels architectural duo Leon Govaerts and Alexis Van Vaerenbergh, had an upper room removed to better showcase it.

"Belgium is a small country that was particularly affected by the First World War," says Melbourne-based Kenneth Park, a cultural historian and tour leader with Renaissance Tours. "Out of the ashes rose a desire to rebuild, to enjoy life because life had been so hard. People built away, happily using new manufacturing techniques, moving from the details of Art Nouveau to the geometry and balance of Art Deco."



Along Franklin Roosevelt Avenue in upmarket Ixelles is Villa Empain, a remarkable restored mansion that is the headquarters of the Boghossian Foundation, a centre for art and dialogue. Built between 1930 and 1934 by Belgian-Swiss architect Michel Polak, the villa has four polished granite facades softened by 23-carat gold trim and a minimalist interior that now serves as an exhibition space. I gaze out through the metal-framed windows at an oval swimming pool with its turquoise water, black grid floor and mosaic-lined pergola, imagining Jay Gatsby and his crew splashing, laughing and drinking fizz.

"Art Deco coincided with the rise of talking cinema and people going to nightclubs and parties," says Park. "People didn't know they were living through an interlude and let their hair down. Then World War II changed everything."

Up in the arty Saint-Gilles neighbourhood is the Horta Museum, a house and workshop with curves and steel curlicues that Horta, Belgium's Gaudi, built for himself in the late 1890s. Inside, an Art Deco 2025-themed exhibition titled All Over: A Dazzling Display of Patterns focuses on the evolution of interior design in Belgium and Europe between 1910 and 1940, showcasing fabrics, carpets, textiles and wallpaper; a green-and-purple swatch by abstract painter Victor Servranckx, a peer of Belgian surrealist icon Rene Magritte, has a design that's part organic, part geometric, as if created at the intersection of Nouveau and Deco.

Inside display cabinets are examples of work by Belgian textile design couple Sylvie Feron and Rene Baucher, who made their mark at that 1925 expo, and are currently the subjects of an exhibition at the Design Museum Brussels. I opt to head over to the Art and History Museum to check out Adriaenssens' curation of the Art Nouveau and Art Deco gallery, which features more than 700 pieces from both movements, many of them previously kept in storage. Others, like the large diamond-shaped plinth made in 1925 as a raffle prize and unearthed in a garden, reinforce the museum's commitment to discovering lost treasures. A standout exhibit is L'Art decoratif, an enormous bronze statue of a semi-naked woman with sunflowers – symbols of hope – by sculptor Pierre Braecke that stood at the entrance to the Belgian pavilion in Paris in 1925, and was awarded the Grand Prix, the expo's highest distinction.

It's all so intriguing that I'm there until closing, after which I make my way back to Hotel Juliana in central Brussels to relax in Art Deco-themed luxury. I'm crossing the quiet, cobbled Place des Martyrs near the hotel when I look up. There, high in the distance, the dome of the basilica is gleaming.

Jane Cornwell was a guest of Visit Brussels.

WHERE IN THE ART DECO WORLD

A century after it burst into being in Paris in 1925 then spread to Brussels and out to cities including New York, Mumbai, Shanghai and Napier in New Zealand, Art Deco continues to stand as a testament to style and optimism and a symbol of modernity. Few places showcase this better than Miami Beach, where a walkable district boasts about 800 buildings built between 1923 and 1943. On

Ocean Drive, a row of candy-coloured hotels – The Colony, The Shepley, the bright yellow Leslie and its fabulous rooftop pool – rub shoulders, their neon trim glowing against a backdrop of sea and palms.

This architecture for the new age found form in the skyscrapers of New York: in the Chrysler Building (pictured) with its soaring spire, terraced stainless steel crown and metal ornaments, and the Empire State Building, a slender step-pyramid with repeated geometric shapes.

In Mumbai, where "Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles" were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2018, the movement was adapted to a local context when India was still part of the British Empire. More than 1400 structures, including office buildings, residences and cinemas such as the Eros and the Regal, immerse residents in the aesthetic; restoration projects are ongoing. Western access to Shanghai's port in the early 20th century helped turn the Chinese city into a global metropolis; Western designers, and Chinese architects who studied abroad, reinterpreted Art Deco using Chinese motifs and traditions, including pagoda roofs.

When, in 1931, an earthquake flattened Napier, a city on the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand, it became a canvas for architects who fused Deco motifs with Maori patterns. "After a calamity where you lose your home, you think 'Do we move, or do we stay? Art Deco gave people an opportunity to rebuild quickly and efficiently and cities were transformed,'" says Kenneth Park.

Melbourne, too, has a strong Art Deco heritage, hosting the 2007 World Congress on Art Deco. Standout structures include The Centre Ivanhoe, a heritage-listed venue built in 1937, and the Capitol Theatre on Collins Street, designed by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin in the 1920s.

