



WEEKEND BREAK

Knokke on Heaven's door



Knokke-Heist styles itself as the Saint-Tropez of the north, a luxurious seaside resort that boasts fine art, gastronomy, shopping and nature. It's a place to see and be seen any time of year, as **Angela Dansby** discovers

“ In the 19th century, Knokke was full of sand dunes and farmhouses, but by the end of the century, British visitors had left their mark – bringing golf, tennis and Pimm’s – while a short-lived airport even connected Knokke directly to London before the war. ”

Knokke-Heist has a reputation as Belgium’s most polished seaside resort, where affluence meets coastal ease. Yet beyond the boutiques and beach clubs lies a softer, wilder side: wide, North Sea beaches, sculpted dune ridges and vast polder reserves that stretch into horizons.

Just 90 minutes from Brussels by direct train or two hours by car, it connects to the entire Belgian coast via the 80km Kusttram, which starts and ends there in the north.

Districts

Knokke-Heist unfolds in five distinct layers: lively Knokke; exclusive Het Zoute; laid-back Duinbergen; family-friendly Heist; and the Polders.

In the 19th century, Knokke was full of sand dunes and farmhouses, but by the end of the century, British visitors had left their mark – bringing golf, tennis and Pimm’s – while a short-lived airport even connected Knokke directly to London before the war.

The 11km Blue Flag beach – lined with neat rows of white cabins – is the town’s defining feature, dotted with around 20 seasonal beach bars.

Water sports range from sailing and kitesurfing to wakeboarding, with clubs spread along the coast and inland lakes. Lakeside has one of the only cable wakeboarding parks in Flanders. Each April, it hosts the Cold Water Classic international wakeboard competition.

Cuistax pedal carts share the promenade with runners, while events from beach races to an annual Ironman triathlon keep the calendar busy.

Knokke-Heist is a bike-friendly municipality with plenty of rentals and routes. The Internationale Zwindijk connecting Knokke-Heist to Cadzand, Netherlands is often considered Belgium’s most beautiful cycleway.

Golfers head to the Royal Zoute Golf Club, and there are mini golf courses in Het Zoute, Heist and Duinbergen.

Visitor passes can be arranged to play tennis or padel. Other outdoor activities include hiking via many marked trails, beach yoga, pétanque, archery, weightlifting and horse riding. To hide within Knokke, head to the “Garden of Pleasure” human maze in IJzerpark.

Each second half of August, the spectacular International Fireworks Festival lights up the sky several nights to synchronised music. The best place to watch is atop De Wandelaar slope in Duinbergen.

At Zwin Nature Park, 333 hectares of tidal marshland draw thousands of migratory birds each year, with trails and hides offering close-up views across a shifting coastal landscape. In the summer, sea lavender flowers form purple carpets on the Zwin Plain.

In the spring, another purple carpet emerges from reed orchids in Heist’s Vuurtorenweiden (Lighthouse Meadows). This area is part of a larger Groene Gordel (Green Belt) made of dune woodlands that includes several parks.

Art everywhere

Around 90 galleries cluster in Knokke, particularly in Het Zoute, making it one of Belgium’s most concentrated art hubs.

The Knokke Art Fair every August at the Grand Casino Knokke has showcased a curated selection of modern and contemporary art for about 50 years. Its centrepiece is the Magritte Hall, home to *The Enchanted Domain*, a sweeping, immersive fresco that ranks among Belgium’s most striking artworks: a 360-degree, 72-metre-long, seven-metre-high panorama fresco by René Magritte (the images were based on eight of his paintings, which five artists recreated, under his direction).

Rotating and open-air art exhibitions can be found at the Scharpoord Garden & Cultural Centre in Knokke, which also has lectures and performances of music, theatre and dance. PeireMuzee, the former home, studio and garden of abstract Belgian painter Luc Peire, has a permanent display of his paintings. The Tuinkamer (Garden Room) has a mirrored box



Top: the beach front. Above left: the town hall. Above right: Dominicanen, a former monastery

within it, featuring rhythmic “optical art” around a headless, fashionable mannequin.

The Social Sofa project inspired 15 mosaic benches to be installed in public spaces around Knokke. Created by local artists, each is unique and designed to foster social interaction. Similarly, Tentuinsteelling – a 10-metre-high, terracotta “vase” – has interior benches.

Public art spills across the town, from playful beach installations to monumental sculptures, turning the streets into an open-air gallery: a man with a hat sitting with outstretched legs by Jean-Michel Folon; a cast iron standing figure by Antony Gormley and a bronze, holey figure bending over by Cathérine François. Other notable sculptures in Knokke include Beach Castle, a non-linear stack of beach cabins; marble Charles Samuel and his wife (a bronze copy is in Brussels near Place Flagey); a giant chameleon sculpture/children’s slide; and The Waving Crabs on woven steel islands by the late Panamarenko. Also noticeable are the peeing angel fountain and compass by Wim Delvoye and two giant, bright orange male figures. In Duinbergen, Tower has 49 stacked bronze heads gazing out to sea. The Polders honours women with Proud – a rusty steel, giant female profile resembling a half-moon and sail – and Ode aan de Vrouw (Ode to Women) fountain with nine stainless steel female figures.

ART Tour combines visual and culinary arts via a guided bus tour of contemporary outdoor artworks and exhibitions around Knokke-Heist with food stops. The tour runs weekly from June to August. Registration is via the Knokke-Heist tourism offices.

Architecture

Albertplein blends art and architecture; its mirrored sphere and patterned square with 11,000 silver coins create one of Knokke’s most recognisable landmarks. Designed by architect-engineer Philippe Samyn, the hemisphere contains a stylish bar and restaurant aptly called Sphere on this place m’as tu vu.

Pale pink Lichttorenplein (Lighthouse Square), complete with a matching fountain spewing pink water, is also like art and where Toerisme Knokke-Heist stands in place of a former lighthouse.

Knokke-Heist is famous for named villas, a throwback to the pre-street naming and numbering era during its development that used unique names on facades for identification and navigation. Several villas, including Anglo-Norman cottages, sit on winding, single-lane roads to ensure the privacy of residents.

The beautiful Dominicanen, a former Dominican monastery, is still used as a church with outdoor and indoor masses. Built 100 years ago, its white facades and orange roof tiles are characteristic of the region.

Modern landmarks such as the Heldentoren and the Zwart Huis sit alongside older villas,



The casino

reflecting the town’s layered architectural identity. Historic mills and lighthouses dot the landscape, linking Knokke-Heist’s past to its present-day, including the decorative Hooglicht (Highlight) lighthouse, one of the first concrete structures in Belgium.

Food, glorious food

With around 150 eateries, including 11 Michelin-starred restaurants, Knokke-Heist is one of Belgium’s most food-focused destinations and even has its own Gault&Millau guide. Bartholomeus leads with two Michelin stars as of 2025, followed by one Michelin-starred Sel Gris, Cuines 33, Boo Raan, Il Trionfo, Caillou, Escabèche, Bristol, La Rigue, De Kruier and Demain. Several of these and other eateries congregate along Kustlaan, Dumortierlaan and the Zeedijk esplanade. The Polders hamlets also boast terrific eateries, mostly in Ramskapelle but also a surprising one in Westkapelle: Bistro AZ Zeno, the first and only Gault&Millau-listed hospital restaurant.

Tiny grey shrimp and Dover sole, fished in the North Sea, are part of local cuisine. Nearby farms also supply ingredients.

Sweet treats are a local ritual, from artisanal ice cream and butter-rich waffles to pralines crafted by some of Belgium’s top chocolatiers. For example, Bij Sandy in Duinbergen and Haze-gras Hoeve-ijds in Heist make ice cream with farm-fresh milk, while Cremerie François in Knokke uses century-old recipes.

Buttercream-filled waffles can be found at Vereecke and Atelier Lucas, while the heart-shaped waffles at Marie Siska tearoom, made from a secret 1882 recipe, are worth tasting as well.

Local chocolatiers push boundaries with inventive flavours alongside classic Belgian staples, notably Chocolatier M and Van Neuten Chocolates in Knokke. Other treats are Moeder

“ Around 90 galleries cluster in Knokke, particularly in Het Zoute, making it one of Belgium’s most concentrated art hubs. ”



Top: the Magritte mural in the casino. Above: Lichttorenplein

“ Kustlaan, Lippenslaan and Dumortierlaan form the “golden triangle” of primary shopping streets. Shops are open year-round, including on Sundays and holidays in the summer. ”

Babelutte soft toffee candies, developed in Heist in the 19th century.

Local Duno seaberry liqueur is made from sea buckthorn berries that grow in the coastal dunes. The orange berries have a citrus-mango flavour.

Shop till you drop

Shopping is central to Knokke's appeal, with a dense mix of luxury brands, Belgian designers and independent boutiques. Kustlaan, Lippenslaan and Dumortierlaan form the “golden triangle” of primary shopping streets. Shops are open year-round, including on Sundays and holidays in the summer. Service is reputationally outstanding.

A free, electric shopping shuttle runs every day from April 1 to October 15 and Friday–Sunday the rest of the year during shop hours (11am–6pm).

Cultural corners

The renovated HEY Museum (formerly named Sincfala) in Heist covers the past, present and future of local life via interactive, modern displays. It includes a hall, mini casino, pavilion,

and beautifully renovated old school and teacher's house. Notable objects are an 11-metre-long interactive painting, artworks by Constant Permeke and Jan Verhase (who also has a painting of Heist in Schaarbeek's city hall in Brussels) as well as a collection of old fishing vessel lights. Outside the museum is a colourful comic mural inspired by 250 photos of 30 years of the Heist carnival.

In Ramskapelle, 4km east of Heist, the For Freedom Museum offers an immersive account of the Second World War, bringing the region's history to life through detailed displays and personal stories. Founded in an old school in 2009 by brothers Danny and Freddy Jones, it honours their late father Dennis, a British Normandy veteran who was part of Brussels' liberation and trained soldiers in Duinbergen. It began with a mannequin of Dennis in his military/wedding uniform and grew into 145 mannequins in German and Allied uniforms with realistic wax faces and silicone hands, plus military vehicles and wreckage from several planes.

The town also commemorates its wartime past each year, marking its November 3, 1944 liberation by Canadian forces who lost nearly 900 soldiers in the region (they are buried in Adegem Cemetery). As for Knokke, its St George Anglican Church still has bullet holes from the Second World War.

The Visserskapel (Fisherman's Chapel) in Heist contains 27 life preservers and 35 lists of those who remained at sea. These seafarers are recognised every August in a sea ceremony at the Vissersmonument.

After sunset

The Grand Casino Knokke remains the cultural anchor, having hosted global stars over the decades. Elton John launched his career here in 1970, while Edith Piaf, Jacques Brel, Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald were other big names to grace its stage.

The seaside casino has gambling until 5am on weekends and 4am otherwise. There are plans to rebuild and expand it by 2033, restoring the casino to its original design with glass panels and adding underground gaming and parking.

While not the nightlife hub it used to be 40 years ago due to noise restrictions in residential areas, Knokke-Heist is still lively after dinner, especially around the casino. There are several nightclubs, such as Kitsch Club, Knokke Out by Tero and 2Night as well as DJ cafés like Ysis and Dino's.

City perks

Knokke and Heist tourism offices offer printed tourism and Gault&Millau guides (the latter for a fee for non-residents) and a creative, printed Origami Route for each of its five districts, combining tourism with playful tasks and a map that can be folded into an origami figure. The routes are also at MyKH.be/origamiroutes.

EXPERIENCE

Heist viert Carnival: A four-day (Sun–Wed) Heist tradition in early February that has the largest carnival procession in West Flanders

International Firework Festival: A firework competition by a different country every other night the second half of August; in 2026, August 21, 23, 25, 27 and 29

Knokke Art Fair: Belgium's longest-running fine art fair, focussed on modern and contemporary art, August 8–16

Knokke Fashion Festival: Each April or May, a series of catwalk shows, exhibitions and events showing off Belgian and international designs; in 2026, May 2–3

Wintersfeer: A winter fair from late November until mid-January featuring Christmas lights, a street parade and ice-skating rink with bumper cars, November 26 to January 18, 2027

Zoute Beach Flower Festival: A mid-August Saturday featuring the creation and sale of crepe beach flowers with couteau (razor clam) shells as currency on the beach near Albertplein, August 15

Zoute Grand Prix: A series of old timer car races in a large weekend event the first half of October, October 7–11

SAVOUR

Batholomeus: A two-Michelin-star gastronomic gem with a set menu of Japanese-inspired cuisine, open kitchen, swanky atmosphere and sea view

Blanco: Belgian-owned but Mexico-inspired, it uses fish from the North Sea and makes a splash with a fashionable interior

Cuines 33: Combines one Michelin star, 16 guests and 17 dishes served in ceramics made by the chef in different spaces

De Kruier: In Ramskapelle, features upscale Belgian cuisine, the Callant Mill from 1897, a terrace and manicured garden

Sel Gris: One-star Michelin, combines creative, elegant cuisine with a spectacular sea view in Duinbergen

Ugly Duckling: Off-the-beaten path, combines The Pharmacy cocktail bar with “fun dining” in a swanky atmosphere

SIP & SNACK

Bij Sandy: An artisanal ice cream maker in Duinbergen that uses milk from the owners' farm and other high-quality ingredients

Brazila: A coffee roaster in Knokke since 1930 with a coffee bar and shop

Crème Karamel: A cosy breakfast and tea salon with daily made soup, sandwiches and more

La Terrasse du Zoute: Offers wines from around the world and shared plates on a terrace with a view

Pâtisserie Vereecke: Among many sweet treats, this bakery makes mouth-watering flat waffle sandwiches filled with sweet cream

Rubens: A brasserie and tearoom with comfort Belgian food and a large selection of Bordeaux wines

Sphere: A swanky café on Albertsplein in a giant silver hemisphere made of glass triangles

STAY

Hotel Britannia: In Het Zoute, a four-star, family-run hotel with Anglo-Norman architecture, optional champagne breakfast and quick beach access

Hotel St. Pol: A newly renovated, family-operated, good value hotel near the beach, including breakfast and a garden terrace

Hotel Villa Verdi: Perfectly located with a sea view, a historic former residence with charming architecture, a terrace and optional breakfast

La Réserve Resort: A five-star, recently renovated hotel across from the casino, including La Rigue bar and restaurant with a terrace on a pond

Villa Bonnie: Newly renovated, a seaside boutique hotel in Duinbergen with 14 modern rooms, breakfast, a terrace and bike rentals

SHOP

Callebert Design: Offers unique design objects and tableware

Chocolatier M: Artisanal chocolate-maker with beautiful products, some with unusual flavours like umami and sea buckthorn

Labellov: Buys and sells pre-owned luxury purses and bags as well as limited belts, shoes and jewellery

Le MuZee de L'AmuZette: A mini concept store and food bar offering designer furniture, home accessories, vintage items and lunch

Must Have: Sells a wide range of luxury brands for the closet, home décor and wellness

Uno and Uno Men: Clothes, shoes and accessories for women and men

“ Zoute Beach Flower Festival: A mid-August Saturday featuring the creation and sale of crepe beach flowers with couteau (razor clam) shells as currency on the beach near Albertplein, August 15 . ”



Top: the Callant Mill. Above: mussels