

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR TOURISM

MECHELEN - SINT-KATELIJNE-WAVER

2021 - 2026

En route to a flourishing cultural tourism destination in 2026



VISIT
MECHELEN



Sint-
Katelijne-
Waver
vol van leven

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SCOPE AND STRUCTURE, PREAMBLE

SCOPE

This plan outlines the strategic action the municipalities of Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver wish to take together before the end of 2026 to develop tourism in their municipality. The intention is to use the complementarity between the two municipalities to their best advantage.

The plan can be read as the manifesto of the two local authorities for the next few years. It is what they and their partners want to focus on, it is what local entrepreneurs, citizens and visitors can expect from them.

STRUCTURE

The plan sets out the challenges posed by future tourism in the two municipalities, which together form a single destination. It underpins strategic choices with data, including statistical data, which have been assessed in a planning process with a cross-section of stakeholders: citizens, companies, organizations and municipal services, all of which have a place in the tourist chain.

This text is structured according to the plan's main themes and refers to detailed figures and research contained in an appendix.

Statistics were not always available for Sint-Katelijne-Waver. The analysis goes up to and includes the year 2019 for demand (based on overnight tourist statistics) and the visitor attraction barometer. There are no recent figures for leisure and day tourism. The year 2020 has been included in the analysis of the destination's offering. Employment statistics and the 2019 residents' survey have also been taken into account.

2019 is the last full year to provide useable figures for tourism. The Covid-related lockdowns, partial closures and restrictions led to a fragmented picture for 2020. The pandemic took a heavy toll on the tourism and cultural sector as a whole, but its effects were unevenly spread.



1. IN A NUTSHELL

THE STARTING POINT

Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver are en route to becoming a flourishing cultural tourism destination, where a sustainable balance is sought between the interests of residents, visitors and companies and where the stimulus of tourism makes for a positive dynamic and more convivial social climate.

The collaboration is advantageous to the two municipalities; both stand to benefit. They are highly complementary and together form a 'hidden gem', a still little-known but burgeoning tourist destination. Sint-Katelijne-Waver - Waver – which completes the rural green-blue band around Mechelen - has attractions which reinforce the city of Mechelen's storylines. In Sint-Katelijne-Waver, the collaboration creates an awareness of its offering among supralocal culture tourists and in the corporate and professional sphere - fields the municipality finds hard to reach on its own. There is a good symbiosis between the two municipalities in terms of accommodation, too. So the tourism services operate as a powerful tandem.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TOURISM

Tourism has an economic impact in that it provides job opportunities and generates additional spending in the local economy. The investments linked to tourism activity enrich the destination and make it more attractive in many ways, including for local residents. In Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver, investments in tourism have been a powerful driver for the restoration and sustainable reuse of its cultural heritage.

The demand for tourism in Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver has grown systematically, but is mainly domestic. According to the visitor attraction barometer, the majority of visitors are same-day tourists, rather than overnight visitors. The profile is the same for the business and professional MICE market: most conferences and meetings are non-residential and the organizers hail from Belgium. The impact of Covid-19 was such that the demand for tourism plummeted in 2020 and 2021, but the effects were not evenly spread. The hotel sector has been particularly badly hit.

THE AMBITION: POSITIVE GROWTH MAKES FOR FLOURISHING DESTINATION

Analysis and discussions revealed that there is scope and support for further targeted development that would be beneficial to the destination economically (employment, revenue for the city and local economy), ecologically (contribution to nature development) and socially (pride and connection, citizen participation). Indeed, even before the pandemic, there was far more talk of under-exploitation of tourism potential than overtourism. The relative share of tourism in the municipal economy is quite low compared to the other cities of art in Flanders. The ambition is therefore to go all out for recovery in the next few years, but equally to use restart funding to stimulate further positive growth.

To compensate for periods of low demand, Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver want to concentrate on attracting more overnight visitors, which is also more interesting from a sustainability perspective. They also aim to bring in more international visitors from neighbouring countries. The intention is to maintain the existing national status quo, and slowly but surely grow the number of visitors from neighbouring countries.

If this is to be achieved, Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver must first be perceived by tourists as a desirable destination. In other words, its offer, which is the initial motivator for a visit, must have a unique story to tell and that story must be tangible and ‘experienceable’. The offer must be “worth a trip”, as the Michelin travel guide puts it, making it a must-see destination, i.e. one visitors make a point of choosing, rather than one they stumble upon. So visitors must be willing to travel for it and the offer as a whole must be substantial enough to merit a stay of several days.

The past has taught us that without large-scale international cultural/historical events, the destination has largely failed to stay on the radar of potential international target groups.

INVEST IN A DISTINCTIVE TOURIST PROFILE

Visit Flanders has set aside tourist restart funding to make the (Flemish) Renaissance more of an experience in Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver. It sees Mechelen as an important driver in a long-term, Flanders-wide programme that takes over from the ‘Flemish Masters’ initiative of the last policy period. The Hof van Busleyden Museum is a key player in this, as are the tourism services. The budget will go a long way towards planting the destination more firmly on the tourist map, providing that the municipalities themselves focus resolutely on their distinctive core qualities and also specifically invest in them.

The trajectory identifies four large clusters of storylines relevant to tourism. These are: city palaces and towers; pioneering artisanship with an international reach; genuine hospitality, and a cocooning atmosphere but with space to breathe. While their potential differs, they are highly complementary. Together they contribute to the destination’s reputation as a friendly and welcoming cultural/historical destination.



MAIN STORY – (BURGUNDIAN) RENAISSANCE

Attractive to an international target group of culture tourists.

We are the USP of the (Burgundian) Renaissance in Flanders, a warm and compact destination of cultural and historical interest with city palaces and an inspirational story of female leadership.

NICHE STORIES – INTERNATIONAL PIONEERING ARTISANSHIP – PERMANENTLY RENEWING TRADITIONS

targeting international niche groups of both leisure and business visitors

These are fields in which citizens, local companies and organizations occupy a leading position, either professionally or as amateur enthusiasts. The target groups are international – but their numbers are not always large. We have dubbed these niches a ‘passionate community’.

We enjoy international acclaim and people make special visits for:

- The carillon tradition and carillon school. USPs are the city’s six carillons, including two in St Rumbold’s Tower.
- The care and attention given to preserving monuments and historic buildings and repurposing. Examples include the Lamot Conference and Heritage Centre, Het Predikheren, Martin’s Patershof, the grounds of Roosendael Abbey, the Winter Garden of the Ursuline nuns and Hof van Busleyden.
- Our ethos of living in a harmonious urban community and humanism. Places of particular significance in this regard include the Hof van Busleyden Museum and Kazerne Dossin.
- Tapestries and the Royal Manufacturers De Wit.
- Innovative vegetable cultivation, with ’t Grom and the Research Station for Vegetable Production.
- Circular entrepreneurship, with Circular Flanders.

Enriches the main narrative and has autonomous regional and local appeal

AUXILIARY STORIES – A WARM WELCOME, A COCOONING ATMOSPHERE BUT WITH SPACE TO BREATHE

Our destination provides a cocooning atmosphere but with space to breathe

Auxiliary qualities that typify our destination are the cocooning atmosphere but with space to breathe, which are provided by the water and the squares in the urban core and the rural, green-blue periphery beyond. The importance placed on soft mobility reflects that quality and enables visitors to navigate their way comfortably and pleasantly through the whole area. This quiet destination knows none of the frenetic activity of larger towns and cities, though it still has plenty to offer culturally. This appeals to a growing group of people, particularly in times of Covid-19.

A genuinely hospitable destination

What visitors also report is that locals are friendly and hospitable. They remark on the peaceful, convivial atmosphere and on how welcome they feel in Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver. The destination pays particular attention to visitors with specific needs, with, for example, special programmes for families and underprivileged groups.

STRATEGY

REINFORCE THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER OF THE DESTINATION BY AMBITIOUSLY EXPANDING OUR OFFER

We plan to underline the **identity, the uniqueness of our destination by ambitiously expanding our offer for each of its four key features – with an eye on both the international and domestic markets.**

- We do this using a notional metro map of storylines to connect locations within one theme and to create cohesion between the core city and the green-blue periphery for visitors with different interests and needs.

- For each storyline we focus on a ‘USP’, an attractive physical landmark which serves as a gateway and content icon. Restart funding will facilitate this. For the auxiliary storylines we will aim at supralocal (Flemish) appeal, for all the others international appeal.
- A substantial investment programme provided by a Flemish restart grant will facilitate the promotion of our destination. It will enable us to create a network of unusual historical locations in and around Mechelen, which are interrelated and together tell the story of the city and the golden age of the Burgundian Renaissance in the 16th century, when authoritative women like Margareta of Austria played an important role.
- We can further enhance our strong international assets of city palaces and towers (along with belfries, cloisters, cathedral and historic churches) with attractive experiences that draw visitors from home and abroad to Mechelen and the region and alternate urban excitement with the serene respite provided by greenery and space to breathe.
- The approach is transhistorical: historical stories and art are contextualized and juxtaposed with contemporary themes and artists, thereby opening up the story of the (Burgundian) Renaissance to ‘permanent renewal’ and providing food for thought about people and cities: a society that recalibrates and constantly re-invents itself.
- Powerful storytelling links the icon to other places in the destination. Each of these chosen places enhances the sensory visitor experience (which goes beyond pure sightseeing) and makes the story tangible and experienceable.
- For each storyline we will create or facilitate some form of collaboration, a passionate community of partners and citizens which gives the storyline quality and depth and also promotes and disseminates it.

MORE CLEARLY TARGETED POSITIONING

From generic all-in mini-city trip to international must-visit for Renaissance in Flanders.

In the coming years, Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver intend to build on their position as an international Burgundian ‘must-visit’ destination and visitor base. Visit Flanders sees this period as the lead-in to the ‘State of the Art’ (incl. the Flemish Masters) with which it is now promoting itself internationally.

The ‘Burgundian Flanders’ theme will be developed under the provisional working title of ‘The Birth of the State of the Art’.

The investment programme will enable us to make Mechelen a starting point for experiencing the Flanders-wide Burgundian theme, with an innovative and attractive cross-fertilization between past and present, and also guarantee visitors that here they will be able to fully immerse themselves in Flanders’ Burgundian story.

The sharper profiling of Mechelen will also stand it in good stead as an interesting MICE destination: a noteworthy place to meet and hold a conference:

- Fringe programme that ties in with the Burgundian storyline and gives the MICE offer a touch of colour and a sense of history and place.
- Besides two officially recognized Flanders Heritage Venues, Mechelen also boasts a large number of other atmospheric meeting spaces with similar cachet, like the Hof van Busleyden Museum (with extra meeting infrastructure in the future) and the Winter Gardens in Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Waver, but also the many historical buildings repurposed as hotels.
- Themes of pioneering artisanship are the basis for association work specific to Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver.

MORE POWER TO THE TOURISM SERVICES

» FOCUS ON THEIR UNIQUE ROLE AS 'CONNECTOR'

It goes without saying that the tourism services have an essential role to play in the tourist experience as a whole. Their remit spans product development, promotion and hospitality in its broadest sense (front office, etc.) and it is transversal and connecting.

Under the current plan, it is crucial that the tourist services concentrate primarily on destination development and cooperation within the tourist chain so that they can use their helicopter view to bring partners together, create themed ecosystems and work on promotions with passionate communities and partners.

The strategic decision to develop a convincing offer and collaborate with a wide network of partners and residents has an impact on the way the tourism services are organized. It implies a shift from the primary focus, which is currently on 'hospitality' (reception of guests, etc.), to the deployment of other skills and knowledge.

The team needs to be expanded if the great challenge of developing an ambitious offer is to be satisfactorily met and if it is to keep its finger on the pulse of its partners.

The collaboration between the two tourism services is due for an update. In the future it will take account of the specific knowledge and competencies of team members, ensure clear communication and division of tasks and avoid overlap.

» FOCUS ON KNOWLEDGE, MEASURING AND MONITORING

Our effectiveness can be increased by the systematic measuring of impact and effect and adjusting our actions accordingly. The focus during the period covered by the plan will be on sound monitoring, based on the checklist below:

A **flourishing destination**:

- **Is regenerative** and respectful.
- Helps a local community thrive.
 - » Makes a **significant contribution to the local economy**, without dominating. Provides good jobs and appropriate incomes, creates new opportunities.
 - » Helps **preserve and grow the natural and cultural resources**. Respects and nurtures natural and cultural heritage and the lived environment.
 - » Ensures **meaningful interaction** between visitors and residents. Is inclusive and sets store by hospitality.
- Respects people, culture and nature **worldwide**, makes an active contribution to the UN's development objectives.

» EXPAND MEET IN MECHELEN'S OPERATIONS

Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver's visibility would benefit from a bigger investment in Meet in Mechelen, allowing it to take a proactive approach to organizations and associations linked to the themes referred to in key feature number four (international pioneering artisanship).

A proactive approach would make it possible to develop a themed network and enhance Mechelen's reputation in those clusters.

PART 2

2. ANALYSIS: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

2.1 ZERO IN ON MECHELEN AND SINT-KATELIJNE-WAVER

2.1.1 PROFILE : OUR DNA

Together a perfect match

The two municipalities are highly complementary and stand to benefit from cooperation: from a tourism point of view, the areas are far more attractive together than separately. Sint-Katelijne-Waver - the final of the green-blue band around Mechelen – boasts attractions which reinforce the city’s storylines. In Sint-Katelijne-Waver, the collaboration creates an awareness of its offering among supralocal culture tourists fields the municipality finds hard to reach on its own. There is a good symbiosis between the two municipalities in terms of accommodation, too.

In the trajectory for the strategic plan we have honed the existing profile of a “small, warm and people-friendly city” based on what makes it most compelling to visitors.

This is who we are, this is our DNA, this is what makes us different – this is what we have to offer visitors. We tell these stories and disseminate them with pride.



» **MAIN STORY – (BURGUNDIAN) RENAISSANCE**
Attractive to an international target group of culture tourists

We are the USP of the Burgundian Renaissance, a warm and compact cultural and historical destination boasting city palaces and towers and an inspirational story of strong female leadership.

The wealth of internationally attractive monuments – summed up under ‘city palaces and towers’ – is our destination’s number-one asset. We have a compelling story to tell about humanism and the (Burgundian) Renaissance, which has left its mark on monuments in Mechelen. The Hof van Busleyden Museum is an anchor for the story of the Burgundian period, both in terms of place and content.

Effectively the capital of the northern Burgundian dominions at the end of the Burgundian period - the late 15th and early 16th centuries -, Mechelen housed the city’s most important institutions. The city attracted not only administrators, but was also a magnet for artists, scientists, jurists, merchants, philosophers, craftsmen, etc., who created enormous wealth and stimulated the arts and crafts. They also generated fresh ideas and new insights.

Strong women played a critical role too. Margareta of Austria (1480-1530) was part a European network of female leaders and innovators. The daughter of Mary of Burgundy, godchild of Margareta of York, daughter-in-law of Isabella of Castile, sister-in-law of Catherine of Aragon, protégée of Anne of France (Anne van Beaujeu), mentor to Anne Boleyn and childhood friend of Louise of Savoy, Margareta of Austria was aptly known as the Grandmother of Europe. She made Mechelen her base.

The story of the two Margaretas, who defined this Burgundian Renaissance, fits in seamlessly with other historical places that were shaped by **female innovators**, such as the beguinages, (the grounds of) Roosendaal Abbey and the Winter Garden of the Ursuline nuns, and provides food for thought and dialogue about **female leadership** today.



» **NICHE STORIES – INTERNATIONAL PIONEERING ARTISANSHIP – PERMANENTLY RENEWING TRADITIONS.** *Targeting international niche groups of both leisure and business visitors*

These are fields in which citizens, local companies and organizations occupy a leading position, either professionally or as amateur enthusiasts. Their expertise and artistry make Mechelen a magnet for people who have a particular interest in that field. They come to learn, to develop, to meet their peers or confrères and to see specific places with their own eyes.

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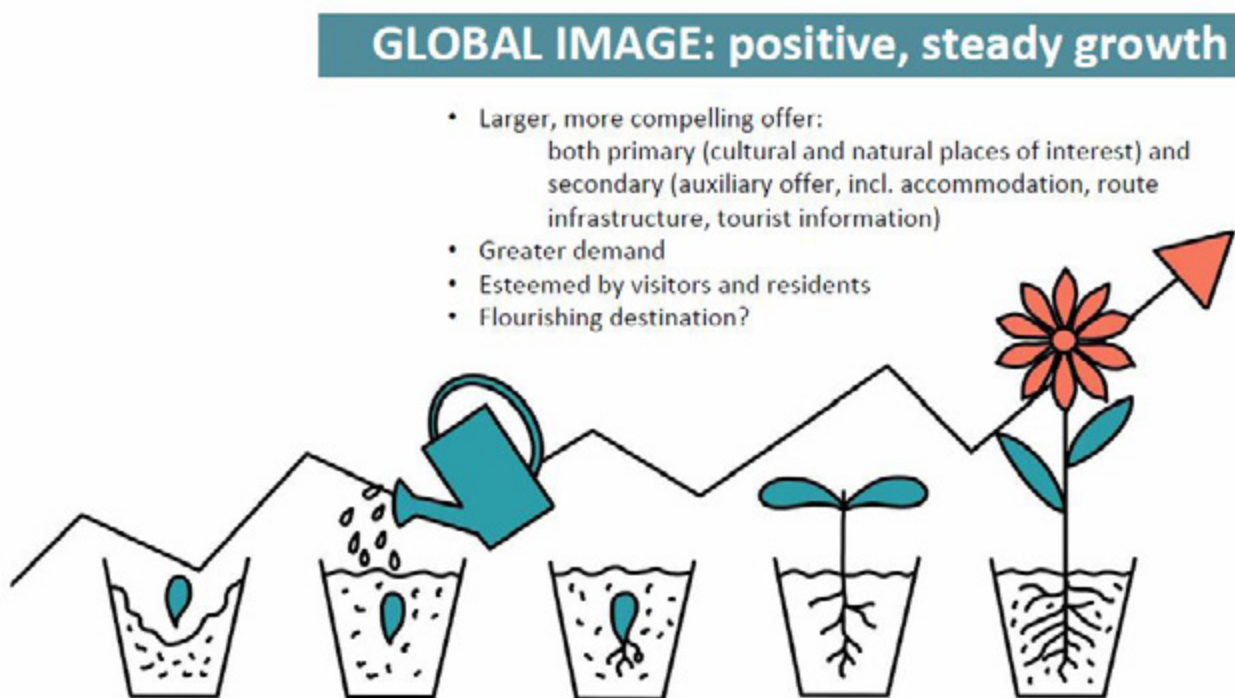
Our genuinely hospitable destination provides a cocooning atmosphere but with space to breathe.

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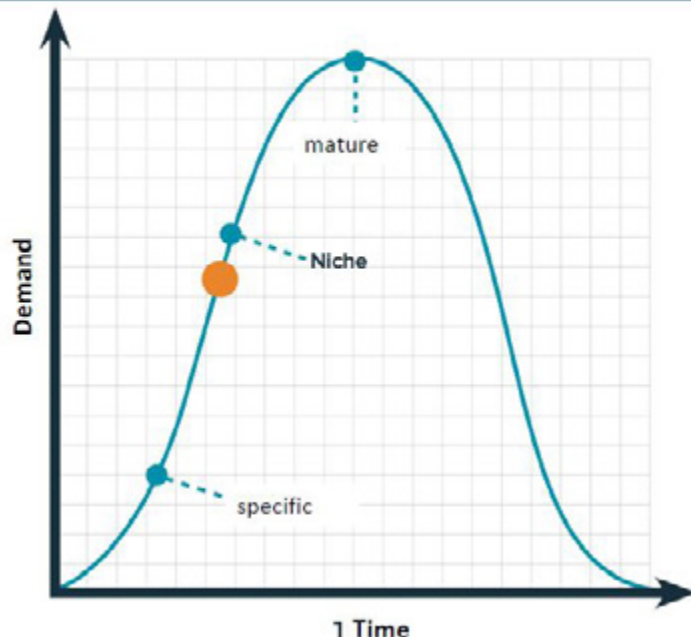
2.1.2 A HIDDEN GEM

Mechelen is small and little known internationally and so tends to attract tourists from neighbouring areas. It is a hidden gem, known chiefly by niche target groups.



Source: Karvansera

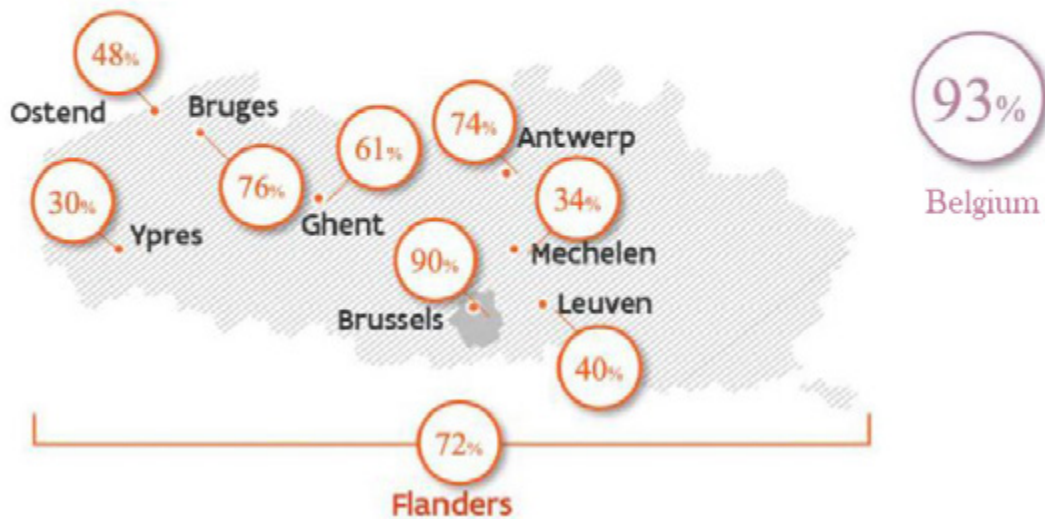
LIFECYCLE OF THE DESTINATION : in development



Source: Karvansera

LITTLE KNOWN INTERNATIONALLY

FAMILIAR WITH BELGIUM, BRUSSELS, FLANDERS AND OTHER MAJOR TOWNS AND CITIES.



Source: Flanders Tourism, Flanders Awareness Survey

2.1.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CURRENT DEMAND

In the leisure sector, Mechelen tends to attract culture-loving visitors. They are relatively older than in the other Flemish cities of art and come predominantly from Belgium – mainly from Flanders, followed by the Netherlands, followed by other **neighbouring countries**. The share of foreign tourists had declined even before Covid-19, making Mechelen more reliant on the domestic market.

The figures show that in practice the profiling of Mechelen as a base or **hub** from which to visit other Flemish cities of art, worked the other way round, i.e. foreign tourists stay in Antwerp or Brussels and make a day trip to Mechelen.

Visitors are (quality-seeking) **culture tourists** whose main interest is visiting museums and monuments. The social aspect is also important to them and a main motivation is conviviality and relaxation. Good food and drink are another important factor in their choice of destination.

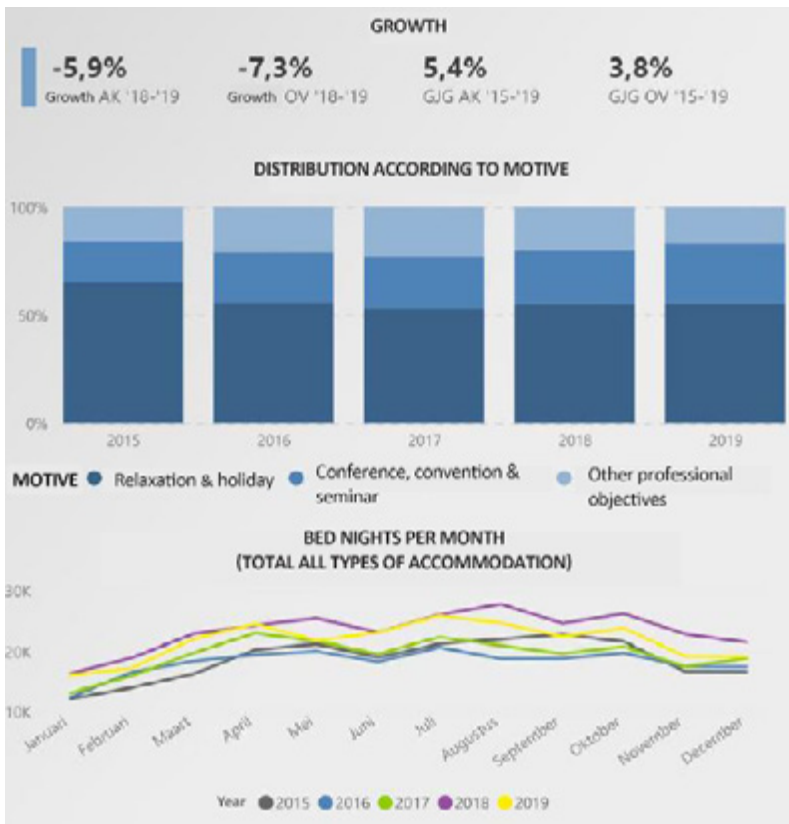
Relatively speaking, there are more **families** with children who choose Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver for a short stay and also more people travelling by bicycle (long-distance cyclists), but in absolute figures these are small numbers. Technopolis and Plankendael in particular attract same-day family visits. We should mention here that these attractions are autonomous destinations, which most visitors do not combine with other places of interest

Proportionately, Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver have always attracted a **corporate and professional clientele** because of all the business activity in the area and immediately beyond, and also because of Mechelen's convenient location in the 'Flemish diamond'. However, in recent years the importance of business customers has increased as a result of the steady growth of MICE-related activities. The investments made in an attractive meeting infrastructure and the professionalism of Lamot Conference and Heritage Centre and Meet in Mechelen are bearing fruit. The majority of MICE's customers are organizations and companies from Belgium, particularly from the Mechelen region and the Province of Antwerp.



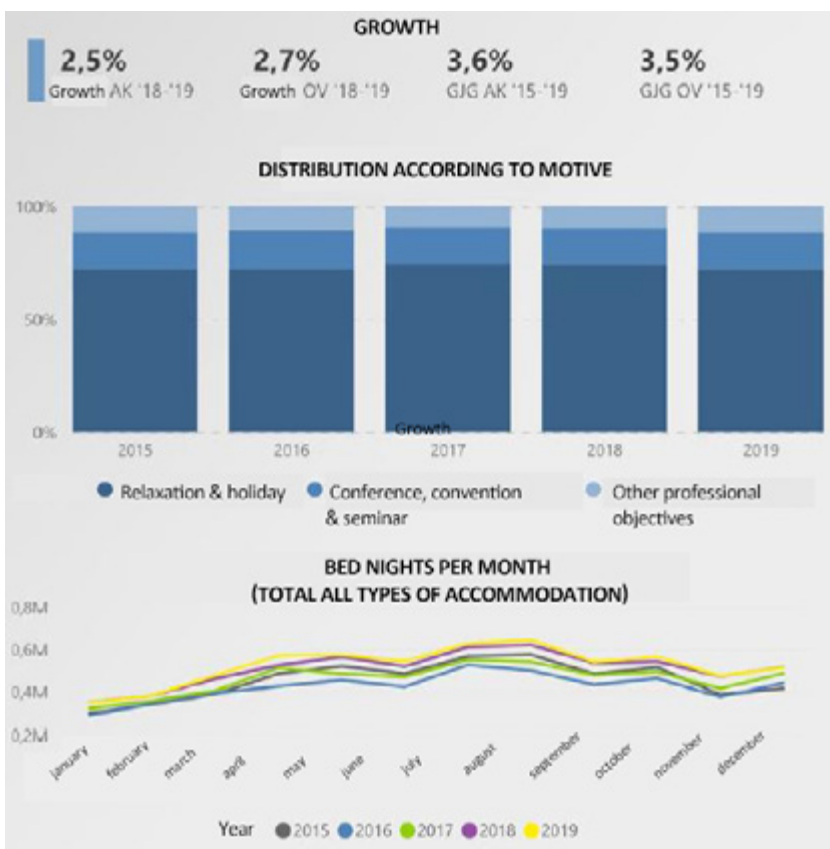
Demand in Mechelen over the last few years (without Covid-19). The diagram shows higher average growth than in the other cities of art and a proportionately greater demand from the business sector.

2018 saw a peak following the opening of the Hof van Busleyden Museum:



Source: Tourism Flanders, Dashboard Residential Tourism

Demand in the Flemish cities of art (excluding Brussels) over the same period:



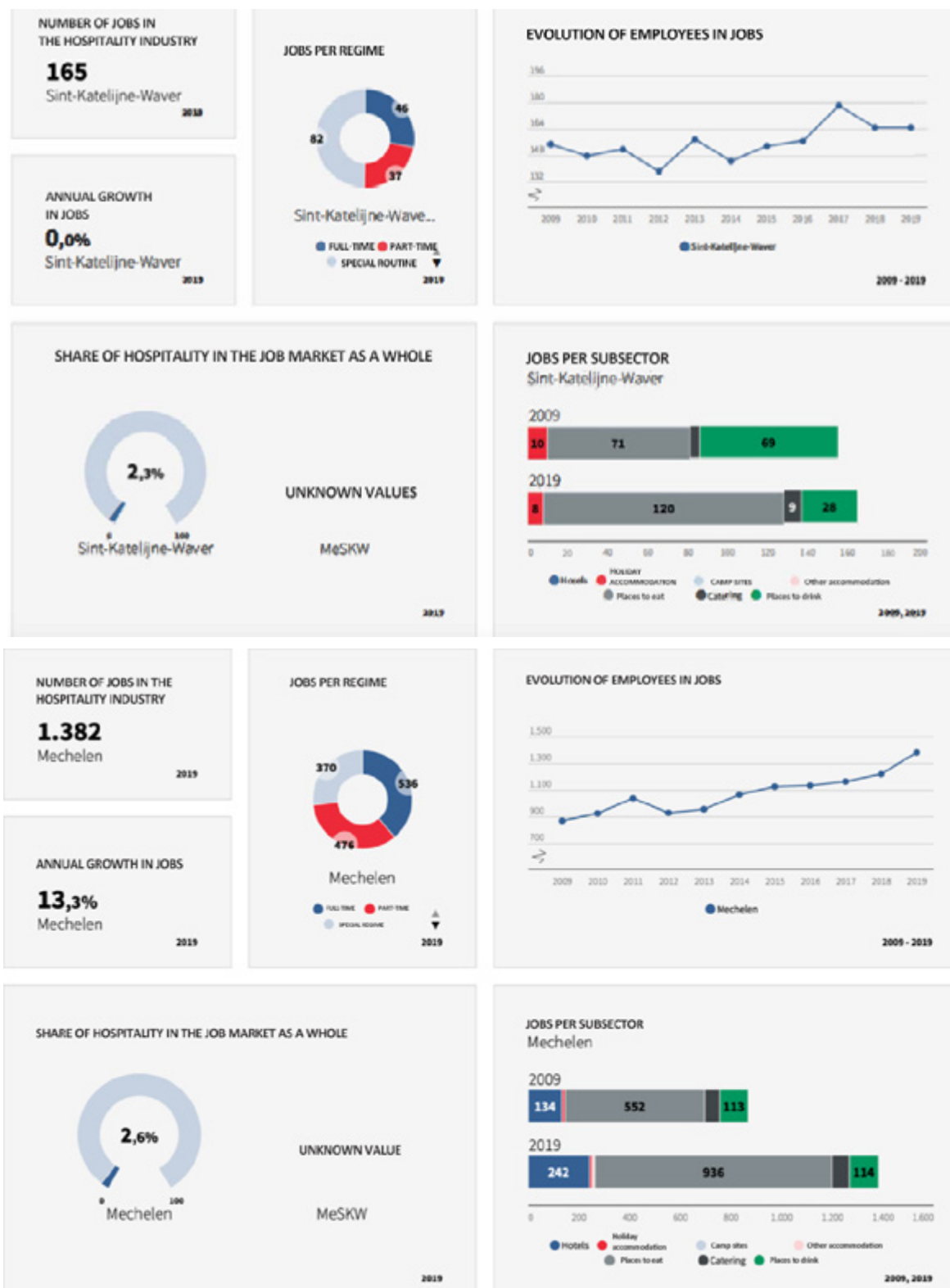
Source: Tourism Flanders, Dashboard Residential Tourism

2.1.4 IMPACT OF TOURISM ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Tourism provides **employment and additional spending** in the local economy. Spending and employment relate not only to the hospitality industry itself, but also to museums, transportation and local shops.

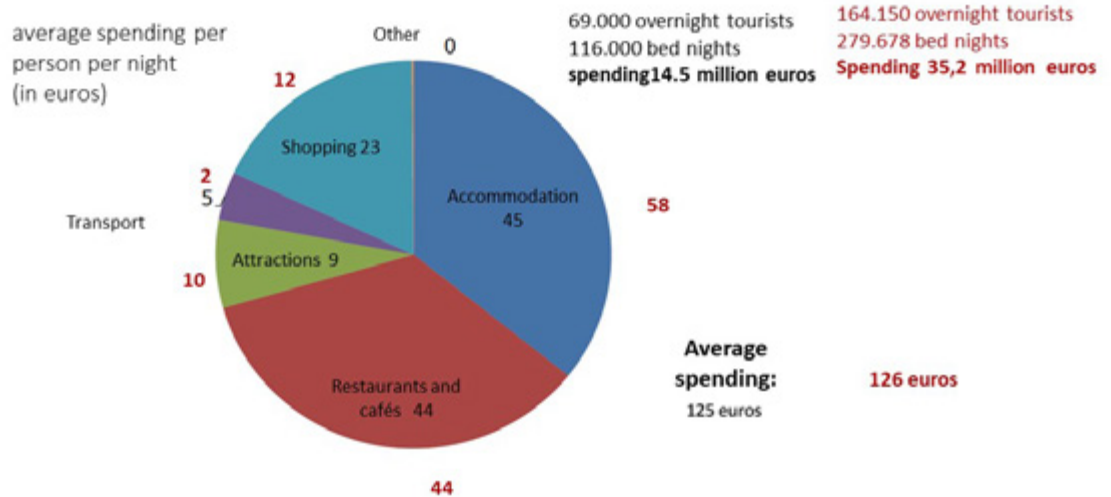
Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver are not reliant on tourism, but the tourism-related investments and spending **enrich** the municipalities and make them more **attractive** in many respects, including as a place to live.

Overtourism or pressures on these places have never been a concern. In fact, it is more a question of undertourism and **under-exploitation of tourist potential**. The relative significance of tourism in the municipal economy is quite low.



Source: Guidea, Knowledge center tourism and horeca

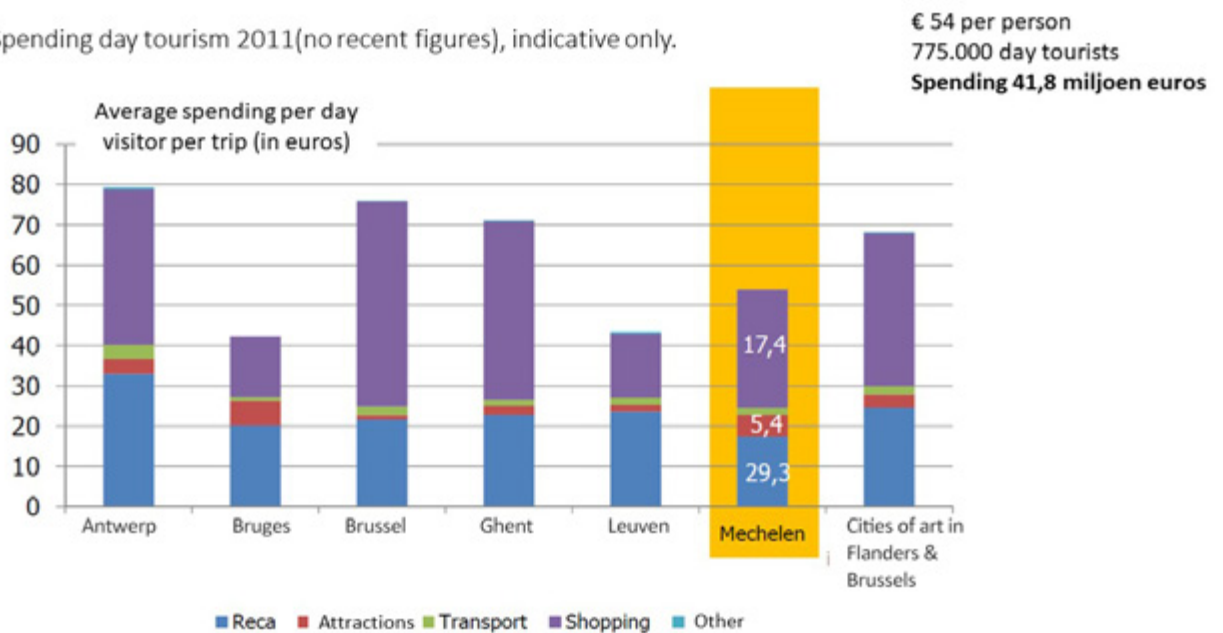
Spending overnight tourism in Mechelen 2011–2018



For information: spending residential MICE tourist: €234 per person per night (2013)

Source: Visit Flanders, cities of art research

Spending day tourism 2011(no recent figures), indicative only.



For information: spending residential MICE tourist: €41 per person per day (2013)

Source: Visit Flanders, 2011 research into day tourism and 2013 MICE research.

2.2 EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

2.2.1 PROGNOSIS FOR RECOVERY

Visit Flanders expects to see a recovery in visitors to Flanders from abroad by 2025-2026. The fact that areas are facing ever-changing travel restrictions – in their own zone or in the markets of origin – restricts possible modes of transport, limits the available offer but above all causes great uncertainty and a lack of consumer confidence. Rising vaccination levels bring some consolation, but as yet there is no certainty as to how the crisis will pan out.

Foreign tourists tend to think of Flanders as an urban destination. The majority of them visit our cities of art. The pandemic has made cities less popular and people are now looking for more peace and tranquillity than before.

That makes it difficult to assess the economic consequences of this pandemic.

2.2.2 CHANGING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AS A RESULT OF COVID-19

Covid-19 brought about an abrupt change in consumer behaviour, accelerated a number of technological trends and led to a fall in interest in some types of holiday. A number of new patterns are sure to emerge.

- » **The importance of safety and hygiene has increased exponentially**
 - Flow management and social distancing are widely enforced.
 - Hygiene and disinfection protocols are now normal practice.
- » **Interest in nearby destinations**
 - Vicinity of greenery – opportunities to walk and cycle are important to residents in times of travel restrictions.
 - Demand among our own residents has increased and attitudes to staycations have changed.
 - In the short term, the domestic market is more important and safer than abroad.
- » **Technical innovations designed to overcome travel restrictions**
 - Online and hybrid forms of meetings, both for individual business tourism and MICE.
 - ‘Stay-at-Home Museums’, alternative to a physical visit.



2.2.3 GENERAL LONG-TERM TRENDS RELEVANT TO THE DESTINATION

» SAFETY

For carefree relaxation and enjoyment.

» CONNECTIVITY

- Real interaction
- New authentic experiences, real meetings and positive emotions.

» HEALTH

Life design, away from the hustle and bustle, resilience. A holiday devoted entirely to health. Or, a 'standard' holiday that also allows guests to work on body and mind.

» SELFNESS

Wellness of the mind, mental and emotional well-being.

» SUSTAINABILITY

- Local, authentic, traceable, honest and ethical – walking and cycling holidays close to home, ecological travel, authentic, local experiences.
- Low impact economy: reduce ecological footprint.
- Slow culture.
- Other mobility.
- Local food production/switch to plant-based.

» FEMALE POWER & SUPERDIVERSITY

» URBANIZATION

As a mindset, urbanization is detaching itself from the city and spreading across the surrounding areas.



» **PROJECTS IN THE PIPELINE**

THE DISTINCTIVE CORE QUALITIES

Warm welcome, delighted guests



Cocooning, reassuring atmosphere, yet space to breathe



city palaces and towers



(international) pioneering artisanship



STORYLINES, ICONS and PRACTICES

- accessibility
- family friendliness
- diversity

- green-blue periphery
- open squares and brooks
- peaceful and convivial (but not hectic)
- restricted traffic

- Burgundian renaissance
- female innovators

- 'Community Lab': pioneering thinking in the community
- preservation of monuments and historic buildings
- innovative vegetable cultivation
- circular entrepreneurship
- carillon
- glass courses at IKA

Growth list

- Toy Museum
- Hands On! Conference

- (Station and surrounding area)
- Regional Landscape Riverland
- Cycling routes in the periphery

- Major exhibition Busleyden
- Greenways
- Winter Garden of the Ursuline nuns

- 'T Grom Fame and Glory and makeover
- Batteliek

The large number of projects already in the pipeline are to be brought to fruition in a bid to strengthen the core qualities of the destination in a sustainable manner over the next three years.

Added recently is the profiling of Mechelen as a go-to destination for the (Burgundian) Renaissance. Substantial funding has been set aside for this purpose in the Minister for Tourism's restart plan ('Travel to Tomorrow') based on an exploratory project memorandum.

A detailed plan will be drawn up and a budget allocated in the autumn of 2021.



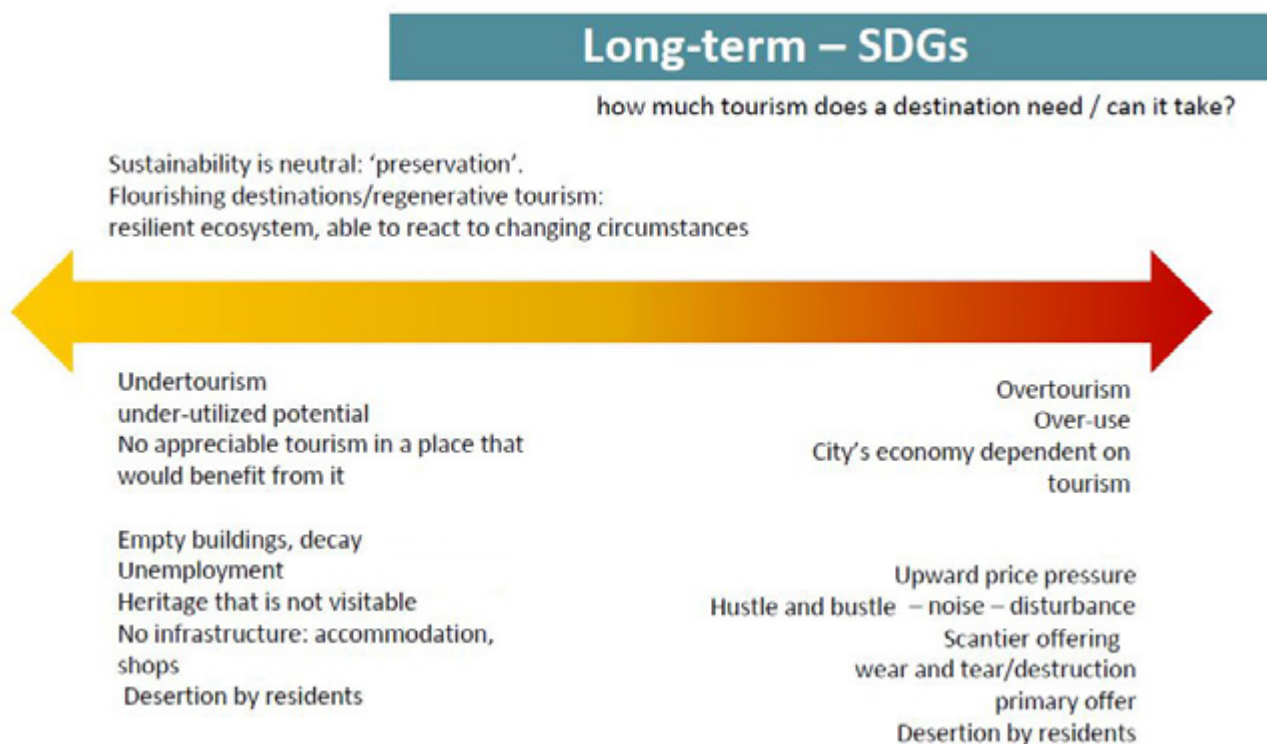
2.3 SWOT

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <p>Larger, more compelling offer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • both primary: cultural and natural places of interest • and secondary: auxiliary services, incl. accommodation, route infrastructure, visitor reception. <p>Highly rated by visitors and residents.</p> <p>Positioning and perception of visitors tally: great authenticity.</p> <p>Range of good quality accommodation, also suitable for business clientele and MICE sector.</p> <p>Space in the destination and green-blue periphery.</p> <p>Restricted traffic in the centre of Mechelen, everything within walking or cycling distance.</p> <p>Active inclusion in the broadest sense.</p> <p>Good access (car, rail, plane, bicycle, etc.)</p> <p>Active and enthusiastic involvement of residents, local companies and organizations.</p> <p>Ambition to lead the way and expertise in a range of specific fields of knowledge.</p> <p>Two Flanders Heritage Venues in Mechelen and many other monumental MICE locations.</p> <p>Many opportunities for ‘meetcentives’</p> <p>Involved residents</p> <p>Renovation and refurbishment projects in the pipeline along with substantial expansion of cultural and natural offering.</p> <p>Protected Landscape Riverland in process.</p> <p>Good results in the domestic market.</p>	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <p>All in all, a small player in Flanders in terms of actual reach and offering.</p> <p>Little known internationally and without international events lacks appeal.</p> <p>Considerable dependence on business tourism, which has grown.</p> <p>Still too little knowledge of niches, insight into segments and networks where the destination is a very important factor.</p> <p>Permanent monitoring.</p> <p>Team’s focus is on the reception of guests and on traditional partners – less on connecting with citizens and developing niches.</p> <p>Too little focus on the places of interest that set the destination apart.</p> <p>Too little investment in tourist development and too little awareness of the opportunities this can create for the city as a whole.</p>
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>Vicinity to greenery, opportunities for walking and cycling.</p> <p>Recreation of own residents - staycations. Domestic market very important.</p> <p>Online and hybrid forms of meeting, both for individual business tourism and MICE.</p> <p>A number of global trends which tie in with what the destination has to offer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » female power and influence » local food production/switch to plant-based » diversity and inclusion <p>Large markets nearby – also for business tourism. Attention given to mobility and bicycle-friendliness. Attention given to gentle recreation. Resources for restart.</p>	<p>THREATS</p> <p>General realization of the impact of travel on our planet.</p> <p>IMPACT of Covid-19:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » crisis and high level of unpredictability » slow recovery of air travel » Flanders = an urban destination = less popular, people looking for peace and tranquillity more than before. » consumer confidence slow to recover. <p>Importance of safety and hygiene</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » flow management & social distancing » hygiene and disinfection <p>Uncertainty about economic recovery, consumer behaviour. Race to the bottom (price undercutting) at the restart.</p>

3. AMBITION

Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver are passionate about becoming a flourishing destination. The municipalities have chosen an attractive approach to making the Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver area **a trailblazer for regenerative tourism**.

Central to this is a **good balance** between visitors, companies, residents and the place. Regenerative tourism goes further than ‘sustainability’ (preservation) and poses the question of the real impact and significance of tourism on a particular place.



Source: Karvansera

The envisaged development of tourism is emphatically linked to liveability, it is embedded in the wider municipal policy and also reflects the SDGs¹.

The ambition is to restore the whole of the cultural tourism and economic fabric in the period of this plan and also develop it. The reference year for restoration is 2018 (opening of the Hof van Busleyden Museum) and the 280,000 bed nights achieved that year. Visit Flanders and international tourist organizations are currently looking at 2024 as the target date for the restoration of international tourism. For 2025 and 2026 we aspire to annual growth of 7% on a yearly basis, based on the figures for the last 10 years. In 2026 we will achieve 320,000 bed nights on a yearly basis, 80% of which will come from neighbouring markets (= primary markets), i.e. 48% domestic and 32% from neighbouring countries.

For the period covered by this plan, we have specifically chosen to look into what the tourist sector can mean for wider municipal objectives such as soft mobility, inclusion and sustainable entrepreneurship.

¹ Sustainable Development Goals – or sustainable development goals of the United Nations.

A flourishing destination:

- Is **regenerative** and respectful
- Helps a local community thrive
 - » Makes a **significant contribution to the local economy**, without dominating.
 - Provides good jobs and appropriate incomes, creates new opportunities.
 - » Helps **preserve and grow the natural and cultural resources**.
 - Respects and nurtures natural and cultural heritage and the lived environment.
 - » Ensures **meaningful interaction** between visitors and residents.
 - Is inclusive and sets store by hospitality.
- Respects people, culture and nature **worldwide**, makes an active contribution to the UN's development objectives.



4. STRATEGY

4.1 STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

What can we expect of Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver as a flourishing cultural tourism destination in 2026? It is a destination where the interests of residents, visitors and local companies are balanced and where an injection of tourism works in its favour.

In Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver investments in tourism have been a powerful driver for the renovation and sustainable use of their built heritage. While the municipalities are **well on their way to becoming that flourishing destination**, the potential leverage from tourism is still under-exploited.

Fifteen years ago a number of striking monuments were hardly visitable. Today St Rumbold's Tower, Hof van Busleyden, the Schepenhuis (Aldermen's Building) and the Winter Garden of the Ursuline nuns are very much on the permanent tourist trail.

Big strides have also been made in terms of infrastructure for MICE with the Lamot Conference and Heritage Centre and Het Predikheren, both recognized as Flanders Heritage Venues, a quality label for meeting infrastructure in characterful locations.

Furthermore, even though the demand for tourism is primarily domestic, it has grown systematically. Of all the Flemish Cities of Art, Mechelen is the smallest and least known internationally – both in the leisure and MICE sectors.

Visitor numbers according to the attraction barometer also show that the majority of visitors to Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver are day rather than overnight visitors, a profile shared by the destination's MICE market: conferences and meetings are not residential and the organizers almost always hail from Belgium. Without the extra stimulus of large international cultural/historical events, the destination is little more than a blip on the radar of potential target groups abroad.

In non-Covid times, the occupancy rate of the destination's hotels and consequently also the actual net turnover per available room is lower than in Flanders' other cities of art. The meeting locations face major troughs during all the Belgian school holidays because their customers are almost exclusively Belgium-based companies and organizations. Of course this affects their profitability and permanent employment figures.



4.2 VISION

To reduce dependence on the Belgian market and achieve a **better distribution** of visitors, Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver are looking to acquire a larger share of the tourism pie and **grow sustainably**. As well as addressing its own local population and the **domestic market**, the destination is also keen to put greater emphasis on attracting **larger numbers of international visitors** from neighbouring countries with a focus on **more overnight-stay tourism**.

There is after all a basis and potential for further development which stands to benefit the destination **economically** (employment, revenue for the municipality and local economy), **ecologically** (contribution to nature rehabilitation) and **socially** (pride and connection, citizen participation, wellbeing).

If this is to happen, the destination must be made **more attractive to tourists**, i.e. it needs to come up with an offering that makes its uniqueness (the story lines) more tangible and experienceable, so that visitors are prepared to travel for it. And, of course, that offer must also be substantial enough to fill a stay of several days.

4.3 STRATEGIC CHOICES AND ACTIONS

4.3.1 UNDERLINE UNIQUENESS BY AMBITIOUSLY EXPANDING THE OFFER

We plan to underline the **uniqueness of our destination by substantially expanding our offer for each of the four key features – both the internationally and the more domestically relevant**.

- We will do this using a notional **metro map** of storylines to connect locations within one theme and to create cohesion between the core city and the green-blue periphery for visitors with different interests and needs. The choice of the most appropriate channels and the specific offering takes that diversity into account. The notional map also establishes a link with other towns and cities and reinforces the connectivity with reasons for the visit.
- For each storyline we focus on a 'USP', an **attractive physical landmark** which serves as a gateway and content icon. Restart funding will facilitate the development of this. For the auxiliary storylines we will aim at supralocal (Flemish) appeal, for all the others international appeal. Our USPs will also occupy a privileged place in the wayfinding.
- **Powerful storytelling** links the icon to other places in the destination. Each of these chosen places enhances the sensory visitor experience (which goes beyond pure sightseeing) and makes the story tangible and experienceable.
- For each storyline we will create or facilitate some form of collaboration, a **passionate community** of partners and citizens which gives the storyline quality and depth and also promotes and disseminates it. It will connect people from diverse backgrounds, of different ages and family structures around a shared passion and in that way speak to a wider target group (younger, more diverse).

» CITY PALACES AND TOWERS

General

Since the opening of the Hof van Busleyden Museum and Visit Mechelen's development and marketing of the Burgundian theme, familiarity and associations with the word 'Burgundian' have proved one of the biggest stumbling blocks. In many target markets the word 'Burgundian' is a vague concept, evoking different associations .

A study by Visit Flanders proposed 'Renaissance in Flanders' as an alternative with the qualifying subtitle 'the birth of the State of the Art' – given that Flanders positions itself in the world as 'State of the Art'. This places Mechelen and its Burgundian-Hapsburg history within a clear time frame, which also enjoys wide international recognition.

We want to carry through to the present day the unique historical fact that Mechelen was the royal residence and operational base of sovereigns and aristocratic women who helped shape present-day Europe. In the course of the next few years, we will actualize this noteworthy fact through exhibitions, a fringe programme and wide-city tourist offering. We will take the fascinating stories of enclosed religious orders and education (Roosendaal Abbey and the Ursuline Convent) to emphasize the power, influence and spirit of female entrepreneurship.

- Visit Mechelen will take on the role of enabler and work with Visit Flanders to flesh out the Renaissance brand in Flanders and convey Mechelen's Burgundian message to international target groups.
- Along with Visit Flanders and Hof van Busleyden, Visit Mechelen is also a permanent member of the project team that monitors the investment agenda of the restart grant. In the autumn of 2021, the two FTEs deployed by VM on this project will draw up a detailed and mutually agreed work/action plan. That plan will have to be consistent with the specific usage guidelines for the restart grant, which are not as yet known. At the moment it is unclear exactly what qualifies for subsidies: infrastructure, operating resources, staffing.

Meanwhile the following action list is being used in the negotiations:

- Heighten the museum experience at Hof van Busleyden, adapt permanent exhibition and circulation, starting with the tower room
- Remodel three courtyards at Hof van Busleyden to create lush green Renaissance gardens
- Restore the carillon in the Tower Room and hold carillon concerts in the museum gardens
- Produce calendar of major international exhibitions
- (Re)model peripheral infrastructure at Hof van Busleyden Museum (museum café, meeting space)
- Open up other 'Burgundian' locations, either physical or virtual
- Create relevant museum experiences based on and relating to the Hof van Busleyden's rich heritage collection in historical churches, in St Rumbold's Cathedral (pavilion), Schepenhuis, Het Predikheren, Depot Rato and town hall
- Develop network of Burgundian palaces in the city centre and Burgundian locations outside the city
- Turn the theme into an experience for both leisure and MICE visitors
 - » culinary offer
 - » routes and experience packages
- Build themed cooperation with other relevant cities of art.



Specific tasks for Visit Mechelen:

- Explore target markets and target groups
- Working with partners like Visit Flanders, Visit Mechelen has set its sights on specific groups and passionate communities in Visit Mechelen's target markets: domestic market, Netherlands, Germany, France and the United Kingdom. The focus is on quality-seeking cultural visitors and on stimulating overnight visits.
- Product development

Product development takes the exploration of markets and target groups as its starting point to create a themed, city-wide experience, paying special attention to media (print and digital) and access to these media through its own channels and the channels of third parties, accessibility, language and the relevance of an experience in an international context.

Visit Mechelen is aiming to expand the Burgundian tourism network in Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver:

- » visitor access to the palaces of Margareta of Austria and Margareta of York
- » visitor access to locations linked to the Burgundian period, which are not open or very rarely open
- » further visitor access to and development of the eight historical churches
- » wide access to the early-15th-century wall paintings in St John's Church
- » digital access (360°) to locations that are never or rarely open and for target groups with limited mobility
- » wayfinding that connects attractions which have Burgundian Renaissance associations. These attractions are located in the city centre, on the outskirts of Mechelen and in the villages and in Sint-Katelijne-Waver: Het Anker, the beguinage, Royal Manufacturers De Wit, traditional houses, the Winter Garden of the Ursuline nuns, Lamot, Het Predikheren
- » wayfinding in the city centre on the theme of Humanism: Kazerne Dossin, Hof van Busleyden
- » increased visitor access to the Schepenhuis (Aldermen's building)
- » greater emphasis on the carillon tradition (UNESCO), six carillons in the city including St Rumbold's Tower and Hof van Busleyden, carillon school
- » in-depth exploration of the musical background of Mechelen and the Burgundians: polyphony, Alamire, Margareta's gradual and (inter)national connections
- » greater emphasis on the Burgundian culinary tradition, which still has links with Flemish gastronomy and table culture today
- » greater emphasis on innovative vegetable cultivation: 't Grom, the Research Station for Vegetable Production

The Hof van Busleyden Museum will take the lead in heightening the museum experience in Mechelen and strengthening partnerships in its network.

- Expand network of partners and intermediaries

It is very important that we build on our network of partners and intermediaries if we are to permanently anchor the 'Renaissance in Flanders' brand and consolidate this image. Visit Mechelen will strengthen its ties with others in the tourism sector which have links with the Burgundian Renaissance and/or wish to broaden their offer within this framework, both nationally and internationally. For its part, the Hof van Busleyden Museum will invest in links and partnerships with museums.



Together with Visit Flanders and its international network, Visit Mechelen will establish which intermediaries, trailblazers and sources (press, influencers, trade, carriers, etc.) are necessary to diffuse this narrative and offer to the (niche)target groups and passionate communities.

- Embedment in permanent offer and promotion

» PIONEERING ARTISANSHIP

The relevant tourist services will maintain contact with important local players for each of the chosen themes and invest in knowledge relating to trailblazers and communication networks for the relevant niche. Visit Mechelen facilitates communication with international visitors on its own website.

- The carillon tradition and carillon school:
special attention to be paid to restoring the carillon in Hof van Busleyden, to the 100th anniversary of the carillon school and St Rumbold's Tower.
- Preservation of monuments and historic buildings and repurposing:
special attention to be paid to a new and permanently open circuit for individual visitors to the Winter Garden.
- Our ethos of living in a harmonious urban community and humanism:
Kazerne Dossin and Hanna Ahrend Institute, Hof van Busleyden – also chairmanship of the 2024 UEFA.
- Wall tapestries and Royal Manufacturers De Wit:
international tapestry exhibition in 2026 as the pretext for a wider programme.
- Innovative vegetable cultivation:
't Grom as regional museum from 2023, strengthen communications relating to extra muros activities, give the vegetable theme greater visibility in culinary experiences at het Grom and in cafés and restaurants in the destination.
- Circular entrepreneurship:
include this theme in MICE activities and allow tourism providers to run with it.

» COCOONING ATMOSPHERE BUT WITH SPACE TO BREATHE

Tourism supports the step-by-step realization of the Protected Landscape Riverland through European projects designed to create new visitor experiences and through communication. In addition, tourist communications will give visibility to larger and smaller places with a 'cocooning' atmosphere and to routes.

» WARM WELCOME - HOSPITALITY

Tourism Mechelen will focus on projects that contribute to an inclusive tourist destination and coordinate collaboration with partners. It will ensure that offers of partners relevant to specific underprivileged groups (e.g. families, people with a disability) become a regular part of its communications.

4.3.2 MORE SPECIFIC POSITIONING

From **generic all-in mini-city trip** to **international ‘must visit’ for Renaissance in Flanders**.

Over the next few years, Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver intend to build on their position as an international ‘must visit’ destination and base from which to discover the ‘Renaissance in Flanders’ theme. Visit Flanders sees this period as the lead-in to the ‘State of the Art’ (incl. the Flemish Masters) with which it is now promoting itself internationally. The ‘Birth of the State of the Art’ is the provisional working title we are using to flag up Burgundian Flanders as an attractive destination for tourists. It means that the programme is by definition transhistorical and establishes a link with who we are now, what characterizes us and how that has evolved down the centuries.

A substantial investment programme made possible by a Flemish restart grant will facilitate the promotion of our destination. It will enable us to create a network of unusual historical locations in and around Mechelen, which are interrelated and together tell the story of the city and the golden age of the Burgundian Renaissance in the 16th century, and link them to the present day. Influential women play an important role in this. We will not restrict it to the historical Margaretas, but broaden the vision to include the role of other, lesser-known women of character then and now.

We can further enhance our strong international assets of city palaces and towers (along with belfries, cloisters, cathedral and historic churches) with attractive experiences that draw visitors from home and abroad to Mechelen and the region and alternate urban excitement with the serene respite provided by greenery and space to breathe.

The investment programme will ensure that visitors are able to immerse themselves in Flanders’ Burgundian story in our destination and that it will be an excellent starting point for a Flanders-wide experience of the Burgundian theme, with cross-fertilization between past and present.

And it will mean that we can more forcefully market Mechelen as a Burgundian ‘must visit’ destination.

At the same time, rather than discard our ‘old’ identity as a ‘warm and humane destination’ entirely, we will incorporate it into the supporting captions Warm Welcome, Genuine Hospitality and a Cocooning Atmosphere but with Space to Breathe, which add a touch of colour to the basic profile.

Mechelen’s **stronger and more distinctive profile coupled with interesting themes will also make for a more interesting MICE destination**, an original place to meet and to hold conferences:

- Fringe programme that ties in with the Burgundian storyline and gives the MICE offer a touch of colour and a sense of history and place.
- Besides two officially recognized Flanders Heritage Venues, Mechelen also boasts a large number of other atmospheric meeting spaces with similar cachet, like the Hof van Busleyden Museum (with extra meeting infrastructure in the future) and the Winter Gardens in Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Waver, but also the many historical buildings repurposed as hotels.
- Themes of pioneering artisanship are the basis for association work specific to Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver.

4.3.3 MORE POWER TO THE TOURISM SERVICES

» Focus on their unique role as ‘connector’

It goes without saying that the tourism services have an essential role to play in the tourist experience as a whole. Their remit spans product development, promotion and hospitality in its broadest sense (front office, etc.) and it is transversal and connecting.

The rise of social media and evolutions in technology over the last few years have brought about huge changes in the way visitors are received. Their first point of contact is increasingly likely to be with a citizen or one of our partners rather than a physical meeting on our own premises.

The services are responding well to that trend and use the motto ‘Everyone an ambassador’ to spearhead their campaigns.

There has also been a big shift in the way a product is promoted, with recommendations, reviews and feedback now carrying a great deal of weight.

All this makes it crucial for the tourism services to concentrate on destination development and cooperation within the tourist chain so as to bring partners together, create themed ecosystems and collaborate with passionate communities and partners. Of course it makes sense to work even more closely with the Marketing & Communication department on this, not least in its interaction with citizens.

The strategic choice of strong product development and cooperation with a wide network of partners and residents impacts on the way the tourism services are organized. It implies a shift away from the current primary focus on ‘hospitality’ (reception of guests, etc.), but also requires the deployment of other skills and knowledge.

The team needs to be expanded if it is to meet the great challenge of ambitious product development and keep its finger on the pulse of its partners.

The challenging, major Renaissance in Flanders project (in cooperation with Visit Flanders) will create a new dynamism which requires appropriate staffing if it is to carry weight and make a worthwhile contribution to the city.

The collaboration between the two tourism services is due for an update. In the future it will take account of the specific knowledge and competencies of team members, ensure clear communication and division of tasks and avoid overlap.

» Focus on knowledge, measuring and monitoring

Our effectiveness can be improved by the systematic measuring of impact and effect and adjusting our actions accordingly. Only when there is a clear picture of offer and demand and how they relate, only when there is a clear understanding of the motivations and rationale of tourists can informed decisions be made which lead to greater efficiency.

Monitoring the degree to which a destination is flourishing is not straightforward. Tourism is measured in inbound traffic and bed nights, in visitor numbers at museums and attractions, in the use of conference infrastructure, but there are big gaps in the information. For example, there is no systematic monitoring either of day tourism in Flanders or of expenditure. The standard statistical framework and main tool for the economic measurement of tourism is the Tourism Satellite Account, but no data are available at a lower administrative level than ‘Flanders’ as a whole.

For the period of the plan, the focus will be on well-reasoned monitoring based on the assessment framework below:

A flourishing destination:

- Is **regenerative** and respectful
- Helps a local community thrive
 - » Makes a **significant contribution to the local economy**, without dominating.
 - Provides good jobs and appropriate incomes, creates new opportunities.
 - » Helps **preserve and grow the natural and cultural resources**.
 - Respects and nurtures natural and cultural heritage and the lived environment
 - » Ensures **meaningful interaction** between visitors and residents. Is inclusive and sets store by hospitality.
 - Is inclusive and focuses on hospitality
- Respects people, culture and nature **worldwide**, makes an active contribution to the UN’s development objectives.



» **Strengthen Meet in Mechelen’s activities**

MICE’s activities have proved effective, especially as regards attracting meetings and small conferences.

Inroads have been made into corporates (company clusters in the Mechelen region), but MICE currently lacks the manpower to work on associations and there is no support from a university either.

Mechelen’s visibility would benefit from additional investment in Meet in Mechelen, allowing it to take a proactive approach to associations and organizations linked to the themes referred to in key feature number four (international pioneering artisanship).

A proactive approach would make it possible to develop a themed network and enhance the reputation of Mechelen and Sint-Katelijne-Waver in those clusters.

Colophon

Realization: Visit Mechelen, Tourism Sint-Katelijne-Waver and Karvansera

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