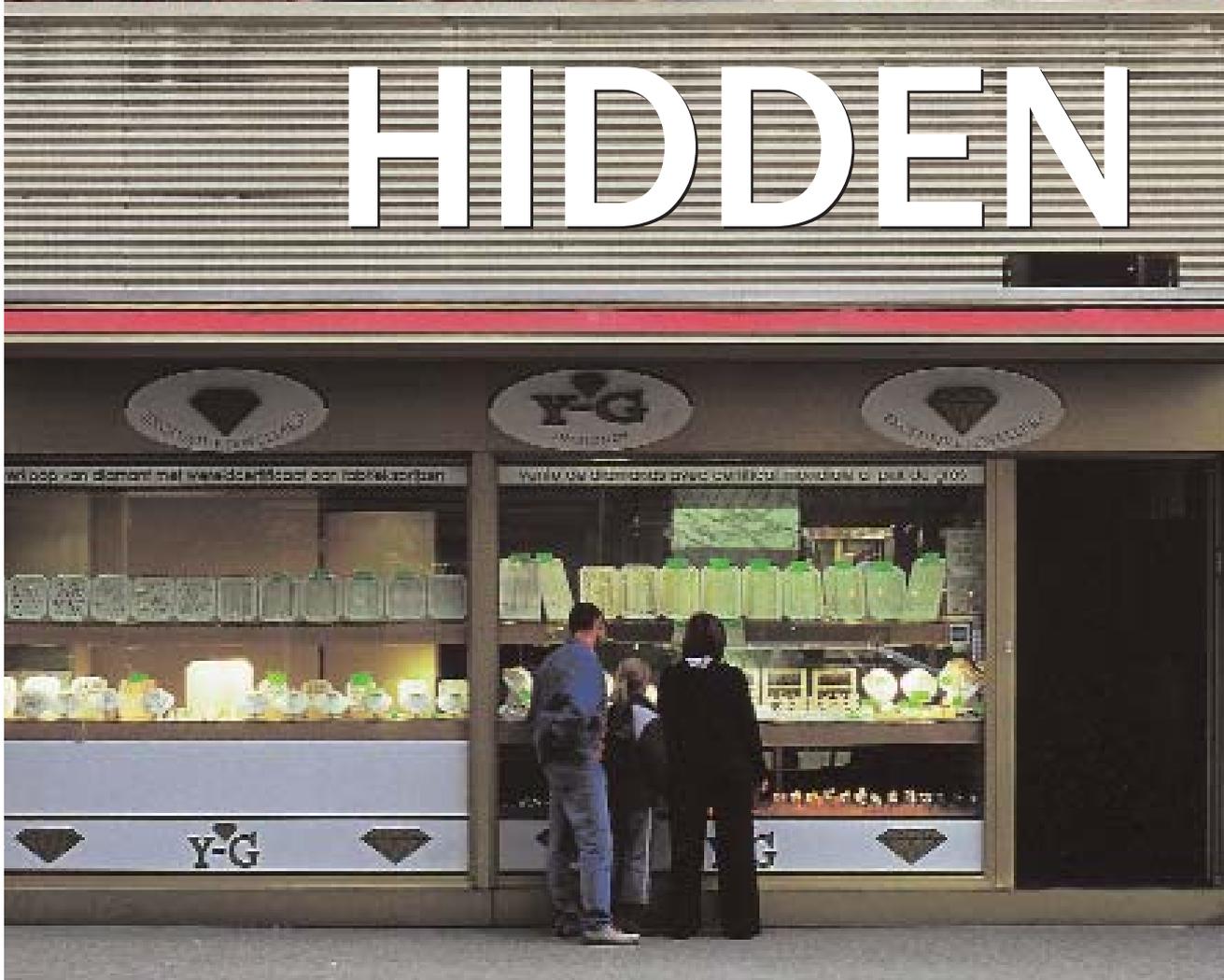




# HIDDEN

❖ This page:  
Antwerp's diamond district is centered around the city's main railway station. Underneath the tracks, many small shops specialize in gold and precious stones.

❖ Opposite page:  
Houses dating to the 14th century are a significant part of Antwerp's cityscape. In the old part of the city, where only pedestrians are allowed, a fountain sits just behind the famous Kathedraal.





# TREASURES

The secrecy, security and privileged access of diamond shopping in Antwerp is all in a day's work for a St. Petersburg business owner.

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO • PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICK DOUTRELIGUE

**A**ntwerp's diamond district is as unimpressive as the Belgian weather. There are no neon lights or diamond-shaped signs pointing the way. Even the tourist maps that guide visitors to the city's famous Grote Markt or Kathedraal don't mention it. If it weren't for the police kiosk and anomalous cylinders block-

ing vehicle access, it would be easy to mistake the drab cement block buildings for postwar housing.

But it's here, on an unmarked, L-shaped street between Antwerp's central train station and pyramidal park, that nine of every 10 of the world's diamonds are cut and polished. So it's here that Gary Sanchez starts his workday, stepping into a world of privileged access and family tradition.

"The best diamonds in the world come from here," says the soft-spoken, witty owner of Diamonds Direct in St. Petersburg. "And that's why I come here."



Sanchez has traveled to Antwerp twice a year for the past decade, spending about three days shopping for diamonds from a select group of cutters whose ancestral lineage is encrusted onto the fiber of the diamond trade — an industry that generates more than \$26 billion a year for the prosperous port city.

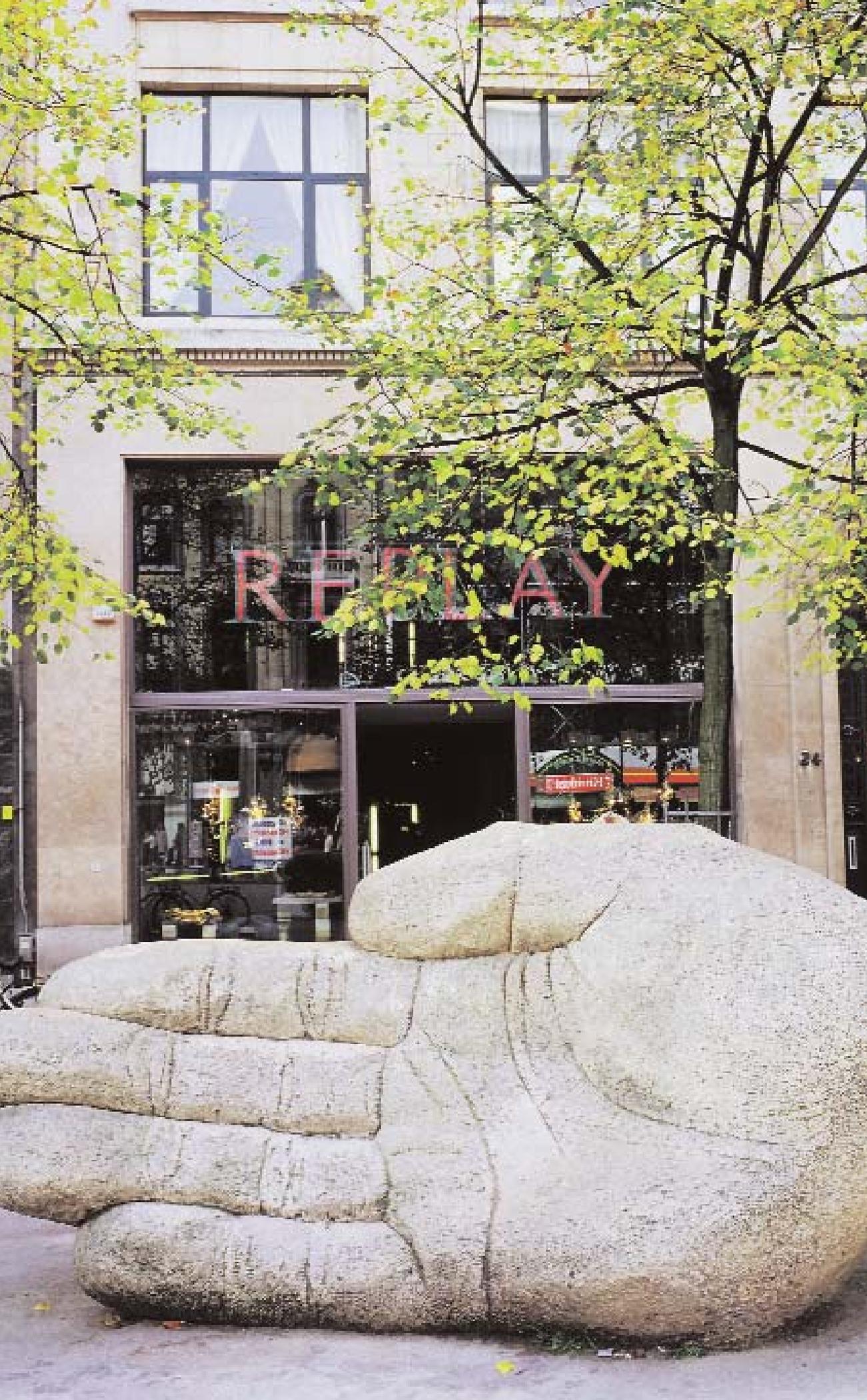
“Yesterday was a hard day,” he says. “A good day is when you find everything you are looking for at the cost you want to pay.” On this October day, Sanchez is hunting for several large stones for his Bay area clients, including a 3-carat, high-quality diamond in the \$50,000 to \$60,000 range, and a marquis or oval diamond for about \$30,000.

Passing a Brink’s truck, he points out the armed watchmen who lurk in doorways and jewelry shop windows. “These shops are for tourists, so they can say they bought a diamond in the diamond district,” he says.

Where Sanchez is headed, the general public can’t go. Unlike most buildings, this one still has no metal detector. The guard in the protective-glass booth asks for Sanchez’s name and passport, and confirms he’s on the authorized list. Sanchez receives a magnetic card allowing him passage to the offices above, where white walls and fluorescent lights are as cheerless as the building’s exterior.

But behind the unmarked doors along the bleak corridor, the atmosphere changes. Sanchez is greeted with a warm hug and handshake from Kurt Einhorn, a smiling, silver-haired man whose family business, Einhorn Diamonds, has a 40-year history in Antwerp.

Family photos dot the shelves and walls, and Einhorn’s nephew, David, answers the steadily ringing phone. French, English, Flemish and Hebrew bounce around the three-room



❖ This page: In Antwerp's fashion district, The Meir, weary shoppers can take a rest on sculptures that serve as seating. ❖ Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Antwerp's shipping museum is near the harbor, adjacent to a wall built during the Middle Ages. ❖ In the city's old quarter, shops often serve multiple purposes. This one sells plants and doubles as a restaurant. ❖ Many buildings in Antwerp's commercial center were built after World War II. Much of the city was destroyed during the conflict and rebuilt with German-influenced architecture. A common downtown sight is overhead cables for the electric tramways. ❖ Small cafés and restaurants are prevalent throughout Antwerp, but so are images of the Virgin Mary. Catholicism plays a major role in Belgium's history; the country once was part of the Spanish dominion.

**WORTH VISITING** ❖ When in Antwerp, be sure to check out these spots.

❖ **La Sirena** (restaurant): Statiesstraat 7-9; telephone 03-233-01-02 ❖ **La Cigale D'Argent** (restaurant): Appelmansstraat 17; telephone 03-225-23-24 ❖ **Del Rey** (chocolate shop and tearoom): Appelmansstraat 5; telephone 03-233-29-37 ❖ **De Witte Lelie** (luxury hotel): Keiserstaat 16-18; telephone 03-336-19-66 ❖ **Anne Demeulemeester** (designer boutique): Verlatstraat 3; telephone 03-216-01-33

❖ This page, top: The diamond district is not just for the experts. Many shops allow the public to come in and buy stones and precious metals. ❖ This page, bottom: Armored trucks are plentiful in Antwerp's diamond district, ready to move gems to secure locations. ❖ Opposite page, top: Gary Sanchez shares his lens with an observer and discusses the qualities of a good diamond as examined under stabilized and color-corrected light. ❖ Diamonds are handled using small, folded sheets of paper. And trust between traders is paramount — a tradition held especially dear by those whose families have been in the business for years. ❖ In a protected area, Gary Sanchez verifies the quality of a diamond. "Diamonds are very personal," he says. "When you find one that does it for you, buy it." ❖ Every route into and out of the diamond district is protected by heavily armed police officers who check incoming vehicles for authorization. Steel barriers electronically restrict and permit access.



office, sometimes all within one conversation. Staff members scurry about, carrying hand-labeled cardboard boxes containing the precious gems.

Sanchez recognizes someone from dinner at La Sirena, then sits at a peninsular table to study a list of the available gems. When an employee asks Sanchez if he is ready to decide, Einhorn intercedes: “*Ne poussez pas*. [Don’t push.] This is diamonds, not potatoes,” he says. “And don’t run.” With his blue Yves Saint Laurent shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, Einhorn makes a wide circular motion with his hands. “He’s always running with the diamonds,” he says.

For the first time, Sanchez is seeing the Arges diamond cut, which only he and two other Bay area jewelers will offer. Designed to maximize brilliance, it was cut in consultation with industry icon — and Einhorn’s childhood friend — Gaby Tolkowsky, best known for cutting the flawless 273.85-carat Centenary diamond and 545.67-carat Golden Jubilee.

Sanchez examines his selections through a loupe he wears around his neck, then sets them aside. No money is exchanged. No contracts are signed. The diamonds will be shipped and the money wired later.

“The trust between us is kind of scary, actually,” Sanchez says. “We literally seal deals with the shake of a hand and a few Jewish words.”

*Mazel*, for instance, is as binding as a written contract around the diamond district. “If you break mazel or back out on a deal, you are breaking your word of honor,” Sanchez says, “and you’re kind of blackballed in the district.”

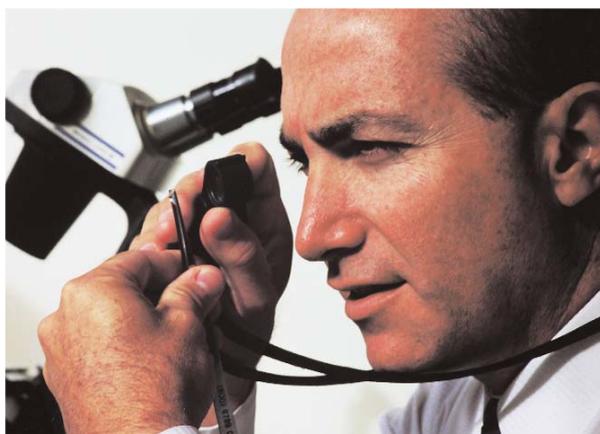
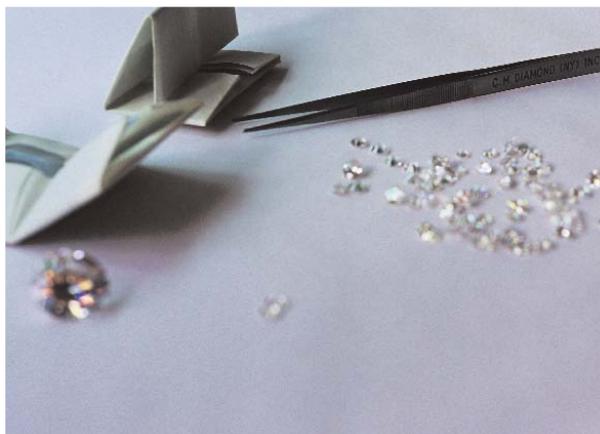
But loyalty doesn’t necessarily guarantee a good business day. “These are my friends and I will know them forever. We trust each other and look after one another,” he says. “But in the end, my customers are my No. 1 priority and I have to do what’s best for them. It’s a delicate balance.”

Staring intently at a 3-carat diamond on a perfectly white card that will show any color in the diamond, Sanchez says — as diplomatically as possible — that his customer is looking for “something really specific.” He folds the stone in a thin paper wrapper and tucks it back in between hundreds of others, nestled in envelopes about the size of business cards.

Sanchez shakes Einhorn’s hand — the cuff of his crisp, white shirt peeking from beneath his black trench coat sleeve to reveal the embroidered letters “GS” — and says, “See you tonight at ‘The Cave?’ ” The so-called bar, formally known as Estro Armonico, is this crowd’s favorite afterdinner watering hole.

Walking to an early lunch, Sanchez points out Del Rey, his wife’s favorite chocolate shop and tearoom. When Cheryl accompanies Gary on his buying trips, she likes to meander Meir and De Keyserlei, the main pedestrian-only shopping streets, dotted with traditional Flemish-style guild houses. The area is also home to boutiques of cutting-edge Flemish designers, such as Anne Demeulemeester.

Sanchez opts for a quick bite at one of the sidewalk cafés,





washed down with a De Koninck, his favorite dark Belgian beer. He's also acquired a taste for *pommes frites* served the Belgian way — in a brown paper cone with mayonnaise, served from the myriad little stands tucked into the cityscape. “I can't think of where one is right now,” he says. “I seem to only find them at 2 in the morning.”

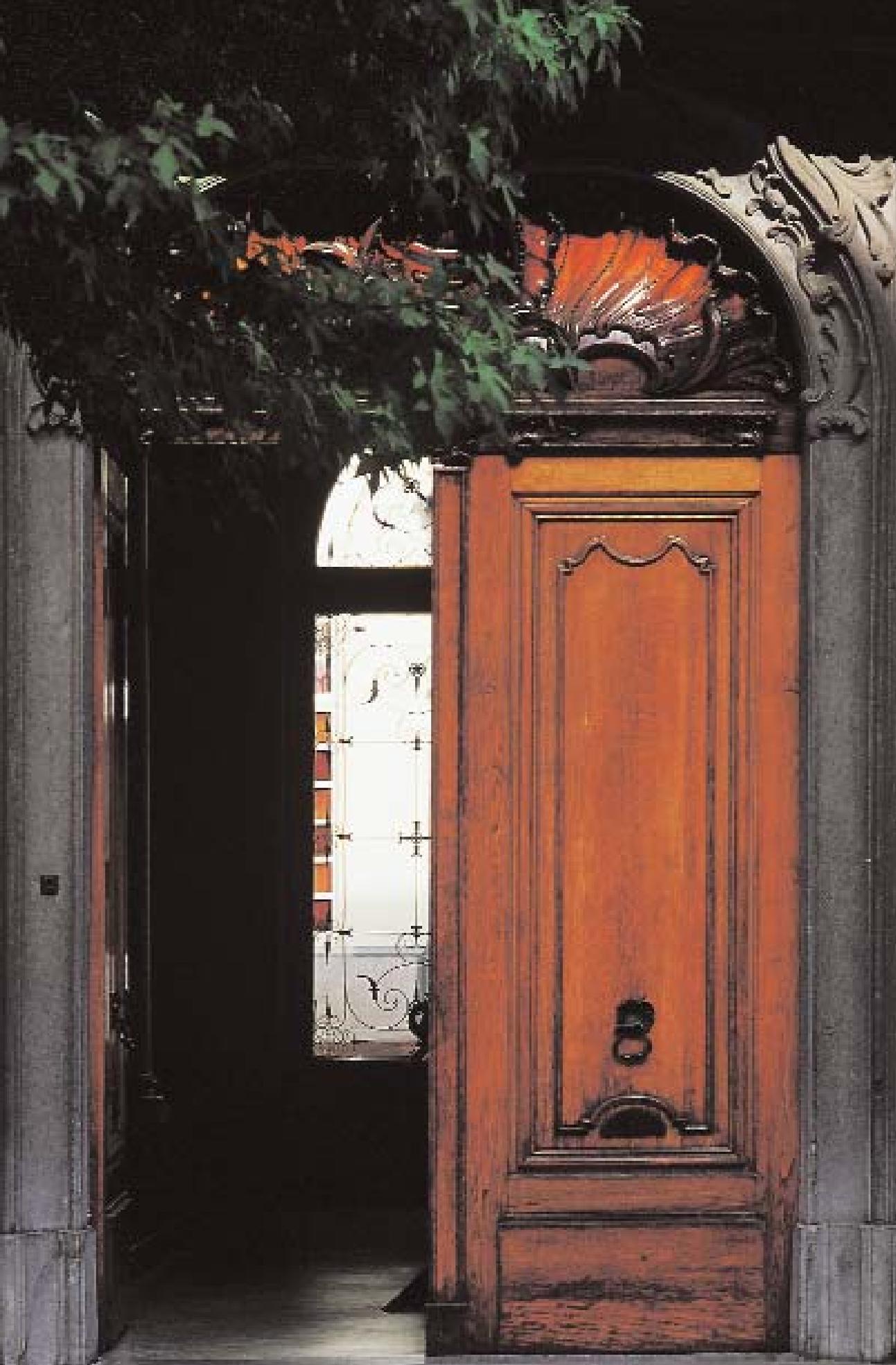
Coming to Antwerp is part of a special service Sanchez has provided customers for more than 20 years. But there's no secret to what he looks for in a diamond. We all know cut, clarity, color and carat-weight, but Sanchez says picking the best-looking gem sometimes is more intuitive.

“Diamonds are very personal. I bought a diamond yesterday because I thought it was pretty,” Sanchez says. “I looked at hundreds that were all the same, and I kept coming back to this one. When you find one that does that for you, buy it.”

His cell phone rings and he slips into Spanish with the caller, talking as he pays the bill so he can rush off to his next appointment. He plans on finishing around 5:30 tonight and meeting friends for dinner at La Cigale D'Argent, another regular haunt of the diamond industry's echelon.

Tomorrow, after a few morning meetings, Sanchez will depart for South Africa on a 10-day trip of a lifetime, courtesy of De Beers, the largest diamond mining and exploration group in the world. Sanchez will enjoy a first-class, wine-and-dine safari, followed by a tour into the renowned Kimberley mine-shaft, and a visit to the rarely seen Harry Oppenheimer House, where the rough stones pulled from the mines are sorted.

“It's a *rough* job,” Sanchez grins at his pun, with blue-gray eyes glistening as brightly as the gems he stares at all day, “but someone has to do it.” □



❖ This page: One aspect of architectural interest in Antwerp is the city's ornate doorways. Some, like this one, are more than 200 years old, but owners keep them well preserved.

❖ Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Many fashion shops have set up residence in old houses, rather than in retail buildings.

❖ Savvy visitors to Antwerp can tell the authentic trams from those for tourists. The real ones use rails; the tourist cars have tires.

❖ Onze Lieve Vrouw Kathedraal (Cathedral of Our Lady) dominates the Antwerp skyline with its 400-foot tower. According to legend, the church originally was designed to have two towers, but after a fire in 1521, so much money was spent on reconstruction, there was none left over for the other tower.

❖ Near the Kathedraal, shops sell an assortment of goods. This one sells lace and souvenirs.