

A tale of alcohol, battlefields and cycling in the fairytale city of northwest Belgium

By Robin Evans, BALPA member

WHEN IN BRUGES



What did I know of Bruges? Belgium, even? I knew I could cover it with an outstretched hand from FL370, but that was about it. Bruges is not near an airport – a perfect excuse for trying out the Eurostar via Lille.

It is famous as the star of *In Bruges*, a dark comedy starring Colin Farrell and Ralph Fiennes. The moral: if experiencing your last city on earth, you could do a lot worse than Bruges. A UNESCO World Heritage site, it's a photogenic city of mercantile history, founded upon the canal network – 'Bruges' comes from the old Dutch for bridge, 'brugga'.

At street level it's quirky: leering gargoyles, ornate metalwork and Catholic shrines on street corners. The local celebrity dog, Fidel, reclines in the open window of a huge house backing onto the main canal. Another resident adds his own character outside the Beguinage (convent) – the bust of a nun in an open attic window. Further afield, sculptures appear atop an old chimney high above the roofline.

Getting perspective

Imagine a linguistic fault line bisecting Belgium east to west. Bruges is the state capital of the West Flanders region within Flemish (Dutch speaking) northern Belgium. The Walloon (French speaking) region occupies the south. There's little interaction across this divide, except for bilingual Brussels on the frontline of linguistic conflict.



Regardless of translation, the national motto is 'strength through unity'. I've always found Belgians to be accommodating and funny with a true patriotism. A friendly local remarked: "We like the Dutch, but their beer is not so great. In Bruges we say that Dutch beer is what leaves our shire horses after they drink Belgian beer."

De Halve Maan (The Half Moon) is the last ancient brewery still running in the city, and the brewery tour was conducted in a very hands-on, humorous style. What did I know of Belgian beer before? It was strong, fruity and often had a monk on the label. Afterwards? The monk indicates Trappist denomination, still brewed in working monasteries. There are eleven Trappist monasteries worldwide and Belgium has six: that's how seriously they take the craft. It was beautiful, rich and strong with a variety of flavours and I consider myself converted. It's also just the thing

to wash down the local rabbit stew and fries. Perhaps maligned as just fries and mussels, it turns out Belgian cuisine is much more subtle and original than I gave it credit for.

Worth a mention are the Christmas markets, chocolate shops and, for art lovers, old masters Memling and van Eyck. The best thing for me? The trip up the 13th century belfry to see the hourly chiming, a vast chorus of bells with the automated mechanics on display. This reminded me of the last aircraft I saw undergoing a full winter check, stripped back to bare pulleys and wires.

Cities always claim to be compact, but Bruges really is. Even in August, tourists



didn't stray far from the old town, which gives a chance to get lost among little humpback bridges and alleyways of jaunty buildings. A short walk takes you beyond the city onto the windmill-belted canal that encircles it, hence the potential for using it as a base.

As above, so below

Bruges was spared in both World Wars, making it feel uniquely authentic, contrasting with the brutality dispensed just outside. Today, Flanders mud rolls gently with maize and dairy pasture, but clues to the horrors are immediate: fields are regularly punctuated by well-tended cemeteries, memorials and whipping flags. Other nightmares are more insidious: the army is regularly called to farms across the region to dispose of newly unearthed ordnance. Tyne Cot (near the site of the Battle of Passchendaele) is the largest

IMAGES CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT: The canals
of Bruges; horse carriages
on Grote Markt square; the
Tour of Flanders; Tyne Cot
cemetery; Sanctuary Wood
trenches

Commonwealth cemetery worldwide. The true price of a mile in 1917 is here in battalions of immaculately cut headstones. It's powerful, even in the sunshine with birdsong in the trees.

Nearby Sanctuary Wood is the opposite – an informal, hands-on museum containing preserved trenches you can scramble through and rows of shells and barbed wire, fossilised in a century of mud.

Modern battleground

Belgians, particularly in the Flanders region, are fanatical about cycling – the black Flandrien lion a symbol of dominance. Many gritty one-day races head through the region in spring, including the local Tour of Flanders (die Ronde van Vlaanderen).

These races began in the early 20th century and, given the annihilation that occurred soon afterwards, were originally known as 'The Hell of the North'. The name still applies given the notorious weather and treacherous sectors of cobblestones known locally as *kinderkoppen* (children's heads). These are not dainty British cobbles, but upturned soup bowls, buffed slick over hundreds of years. Flanders also has some nasty *bergs* (mountains) with ominous names: *Koppenberg* and *Wolvenberg*. Weather, road surface, and gradient combine to form something uniquely brutal and iconic.

The beauty of a Tour of Flanders weekend is a chance to ride and then spectate on consecutive days. During the ride, I found myself slamming over a section of cobblestones, cheeks burning in a group of burly riders. Hearing an unusual noise, I looked down to see my gearing disintegrate and tear the back wheel apart. The *kinderkoppen* had destroyed my bike after one hour. The following day was impressive but bittersweet, watching the professionals seemingly glide over the same surface at twice the speed for 260 kilometres of inhumane duelling.

So, next time you find yourself approaching descent into London, the lights of the Low Countries laid out like fluorescent brain coral, consider choosing somewhere under the radar for your next break. ■



HANDY INFORMATION

- Bruges tourism: www.visitbruges.be
- Halve Maan brewery: www.halvemaan.be
- Tour of Flanders: www.rondevanvlaanderen.be
- The Eurostar runs direct from St Pancras to Lille, with a short coach transfer to Bruges: www.eurostar.com
- Bruges is also situated near to the other picturesque Flemish cities of Ghent and Antwerp
- Nearby Ostend-Bruges Airport (EBOS) operates predominantly for seasonal Belgian holiday traffic
- The nearest well-connected airports are Brussels and Charleroi, which offer rail and coach connections to Bruges
- Zeebrugge (Bruges-on-Sea) is served by P&O Ferries: www.poferries.com