

021025 Belgium

My plans for this past autumn holiday included riding my bicycle through the countryside in Luxembourg as well as through the countryside in Germany. I had also hoped to be able to see a bit of Belgium, since I would be in the neighborhood. While pricing out my flights to Luxembourg, I discovered that it was much less expensive to fly into Brussels than it was to fly to Luxembourg City. I contemplated taking the train from Brussels to Bouillon in the Belgium Ardennes for the night, but opted instead to spend my time in the cities of Luxembourg rather than to race about between the two countries. I therefore only spent a few hours wandering around Brussels before hopping my train to Luxembourg City on Saturday, October 12.

Since I was not sure of my travel itinerary, I decided not to bring my bicycle with me on the plane in lieu of renting once I arrived in Luxembourg City. I did however bring my bicycle helmet and tools with which to fix the rental bike in the case of a problem. Even though I would be gone for a week, I managed to jam all of my things into a small daypack which I was rather proud of having done. The only problem was that I still needed to check a bag to bring my Leatherman and tools on the plane and so I also brought a second, smaller bag.

In my emails from the Netherlands last spring, I explained that Belgium was once a part of the Netherlands. Although the countries were once united, this is not the whole story. The histories of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg have been intertwined through time and I will endeavor to relate some of the history to you.

Early in history, the region was ruled by the Romans, then the Germanic Franks and then the Carolingians which included Charlemagne who was the first Holy Roman Emperor. When Charlemagne died, his grandsons squabbled over the vast kingdom which eventually led resulted in the kingdom being roughly split into the areas presently known as Germany, France and the Low Countries.

Local counts held much of the power in the region during the 9th and 10th centuries and it was during this time that Sigefroi built the first castle in Luxembourg which would be the foundation for the modern Luxembourg City. By the 14th century, the region was ruled over by the dukes of Burgundy. From this house came Charles V who would later become the king of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor. During his reign, the Reformation swept through the mostly Catholic regions of the Low Countries and most of Europe. The Reformation met with severe repercussions in the Low Countries under the Edict of Blood which demanded death for anyone convicted of heresy. Charles's son, Philip who ruled from Spain, was even more zealous in his squashing of the Protestant movements. This led to the Revolt of the Netherlands where the strong influences of Calvinism led the Dutch to revolt and expel the Spanish. The ending divisions in the Low Countries led to the modern borders of the Netherlands while Belgium and Luxembourg became known as the Spanish Netherlands.

Thousands of Protestants were forced to leave the Spanish Netherlands, much to the delight of the Dutch who benefited from the influx of skilled trades people. The Spanish Netherlands would fare badly during the next 150 years as the War of Devolution, the Dutch War and the War of the Grand Alliance were all fought in the

lands between the French and the Dutch. In 1701 the region traded hands to the French and then in 1713 to the Austrians. The Austrians brought the Enlightenment to the neglected region and spurred on rapid development. But by 1794, the French had recaptured the United Belgium States and tried to absorb the area into France. However, the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo near Brussels led to the creation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands which included Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg in an attempt to try to create balance in the region and to prevent French expansion northwards. Belgium revolted in 1830 and was recognized as an independent country in 1831.

After the defeat of Napoleon, Luxembourg became an independent Grand Duchy which was eventually divided in ownership between Belgium and the Netherlands. The division is why the eastern part of modern day Belgium is called Luxembourg. The Dutch owned portion would become the modern day country. The European powers declared Luxembourg to be a neutral state in 1867. At this point, all three countries had roughly their modern day borders.

Both Belgium and Luxembourg were occupied by Germany during the two World Wars. After the end of WWII, both countries became part of NATO and the EU. Belgium is home to the NATO headquarters and both countries are host to the key EU institutions. The city of Brussels is where the NATO and EU establishments are located in Belgium. The city is also the capital of the country.

Belgium is approximately the size of the state of Maryland and home to 10,275,000 people. The people of Belgium speak Flemish, French and German depending on their geographic location within the country. Flemish is spoken in the northern region of Flanders and French is spoken in the southern region of Wallonia, based on the invisible line between the two regions, called the linguistic divide which was created in 1962. Brussels is a separate region within Flanders and is designated as bilingual. Each region not only has its own language, but also has its own government with a good deal of autonomy. Throw in the German speaking region in the east of the country and which falls under the authority of Wallonia and you have a real alphabet soup. Tensions between the regions have led to people openly asking about a split in the country. Not that I noticed any of this as a visitor to the country. People in Brussels were fluent in English and so I had no problem communicating. However, if I had gone south to Wallonia, I may have had difficulty since people there are rumored to be reluctant to learn either Flemish or English.

Belgium is well known for its chocolates and beer. I only had to live in Europe for a few days to realize that the "chocolate" which is sold in the US is, well for lack of a better word, crap. The US congress has allowed US chocolate manufacturers to use a certain percentage of wax in their chocolate. However, not everything in the European chocolate is pure either. Fierce debate raged in the EU in recent years over the definition of chocolate. The debate was caused by the British chocolate industry using vegetable fat in their chocolate rather than the more expensive coco butter used in Belgium. Belgium declared the use of vegetable fat in chocolate to be illegal and was upset that the British could use the ingredient and therefore sell their product at a less expensive price. In March 2000, the EU declared that it was permissible to use up to 5% vegetable fats rather than coco butter, to the horror of Belgium manufacturers. Plus the move was feared to risk the jobs of thousands of works in

West Africa where cocoa is grown. Many Belgium manufacturers have pledged to use only coco butter, much to the delight of chocolate lovers everywhere.

I could write dozens of pages in a vain attempt to describe the variety of Belgium beers. The country makes somewhere between 400 and 800 brews, ranging from the top-fermented and bottom-fermented to the spontaneously fermented and re-fermented. So as not to bore the reader, I wont go any further than to say that once you have had one of the hundreds of Belgium beers, you realize that the majority of beers brewed elsewhere in the world are nothing but water with bubbles. What is not as well known is that Belgium is also home to hundreds of distilleries for gin. Gin has been distilled in Belgium since the middle ages when it was originally considered a medicine. It was not until the English discovered the liquor that the name of gin was granted and people have been mixing it with soda water and a lime ever since.

Upon my arrival at the airport in Brussels, I purchased a train ticket from the airport to Luxembourg City. With the ticket, I could spend the afternoon in Brussels and then catch any of the hourly trains to Luxembourg City when I was ready. I just had to be in Luxembourg City by 20:00 for my place to be kept at the youth hostel where I had made my online reservation for the night. My ticket from the airport to Luxembourg City was only €24. I was going halfway across one country and into another for less than the cost of an Amtrak ticket from Boston to Portland, Maine.

My first impression of the city was the splattering of graffiti which greeted me from my train window as we left the airport. The ride into the city was not very nice, but how often are train rides into cities? I got off at the train station and took a tram to the area of the Grand Place. The public transit in Brussels consists of busses as well as the trams which travel both above and below ground. Underground is a maze of tracks which give the impression of a busy city street as trams stop to wait before turning across the tracks of the incoming trains.

The Grand Place is an open square, accessible only through narrow side streets. The Grand Place has been called Brussels most amazing architectural feature with its beautiful baroque guildhalls, the beautiful Hotel de Ville and popular outdoor cafes and cozy basement restaurants. All of the buildings have exquisite stone work with spires reaching up to they sky. The Hotel de Ville has a creamy facade covered with stone reliefs and an intricate tower topped with a stature of St. Michel, the citys patron saint.

I wandered the little side streets, often lined with restaurants catering to the tourists. Instead of eating lunch in one of these, I opted to get a Belgium waffle from a small store front. The waffle was not of the dessert variety, but instead was stuffed with mozzarella cheese and ham and was quite large and quite good. There were of course lots of places selling Belgium chocolates, beer or lace. Flemish weavers in the 16th century gained prominence for their skill and needlepoint lace was predominantly made in Brussels. The lace was originally made with flax, but in the 1800s, the flax was replaced with cotton. Today, much of the lace is machine made elsewhere in the world, but handmade lace can still be found if you are willing to pay the price.

After a few hours, I hopped a tram back to the train station where I boarded my train to Luxembourg City. It is unfair to form an opinion of a city based on a visit of only a

few hours. However, my initial impression of the city does not leave me with the desire to make an effort to return.

The train left the industrial area around Brussels and eventually we were traveling through rolling fields with scattered trees. By riding the train, I was able to see a good deal of the countryside between naps. Finally, we arrived in the city of Arlon where the engine of the train was changed in preparation for crossing the border into Luxembourg. Shortly thereafter, we pulled into the station in Luxembourg City.

The Lonely Planet Belgium and Luxembourg and the CIA website were referenced in the writing of this email.

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