

Bruges by Eurostar 18th to 21st May 2016

Thirteen members of our U3A joined the Riviera Tour to Bruges and Ypres with the Tour Manager being our own U3A member Hannie Woolsey. Travel was from Nottingham to Lille by rail and then onwards to Bruges by coach. This outward journey together with all travel in Belgium and the return to Nottingham was on time, comfortable and impeccably organised.

Arrival in Bruges and check in at Martin's Hotel was achieved by early evening and a short evening orientation walk commenced at 19.40. Unfortunately, just as we left the hotel it began to rain, and with some calling enough as the walk progressed there remained just six intrepid and very wet members to join Hannie for dinner at a very good local restaurant. The food and drink was enjoyed by all with the local speciality of Flemish Beef Stew being particularly appreciated.

Thursday dawned bright and sunny and this weather was to stay with us for the rest of the tour. Hannie led us on a walking tour of the city taking in the main sights and attractions of this charming, compact and historical city, some buildings dating from the 11th century. Much that would perhaps have gone un-noticed by an independent visitor was brought to life by our Tour manager.



Belgium and Flanders in particular is very famous for brewing beer with in excess of 500 varieties brewed throughout the country, so second invitations to visit a working brewery museum were un-necessary, particularly to members of our Real Ale Group! The Halve Maan (Half Moon) brewery is located right in the middle of the city and the tour was very interesting ending with samples of Brugse Zot Blond unfiltered beer. This gave a feeling of wellbeing to our members and set us up for a relaxing boat tour of some of Bruges' canals. This gave a different perspective to some of the sights viewed from dry ground.

Evening dinner was enjoyed in restaurants fairly close to the hotel with the Leffe 'blond and brun' being well to the fore.

Quote from Chris Soar our Real Ale Group leader and Fine Ale connoisseur over dinner..... "The Leffe is really on form but you must see the wall of beer just round the corner from the hotel'.

Unfortunately I never made it.

Friday morning was free time so it gave opportunity to spend time watching life over a coffee and cake, look more in depth at some of the many museums, take a horse and carriage ride around the city, shop or just rest.

We departed after lunch by coach to visit Ypres, the centre of British operations in Belgium during WW1. We made detours to visit Sanctuary Wood (Hill 62) to see one of the few last examples of WW1 trenches and to pay our respects to the fallen at Tyne Cot Cemetery at Passchendaele.

After these very sobering visits we continued to the remarkable town of Ypres. Although literally flattened during the war the town has been painstakingly rebuilt to its original state. Time was available to visit the wonderful museum 'In Flanders Fields' at the old Wool Market. This museum is very thought provoking and brings home the futility of war and the suffering of many innocents.

Quote from Peter Smith... 'For me the heart of the programme was visiting the area of the Ypres WW1 battlefields, made so much more interesting by Hannie's briefings as we travelled to and through it.'



Our visit to Ypres concluded as so many visits do with the 'Last Post' ceremony at the Menin Gate. This highly emotional ceremony was enhanced by a short performance from 'The Orpheus Singers', a ladies choir from Hadleigh in Essex, prior to the buglers from Ypres sounding the Last Post as they have done every evening since 1928 except for the period of WW2.

Quote from Paul and Sue Childs... 'For us the sombre scene at Tyne Cot with all those graves was heart-wrenching and then the extremely moving Last Post at the Menin Gate will stay with us'.

Quote from Maureen Johnson... 'I was so pleased that Hannie was able to tweak the schedule so that we were able to visit the Menin Gate for the Last Post - it made the visit



Saturday arrived too quickly for some and the day started with a much anticipated visit to a Chocolate Shop and a demonstration of how the best Belgian chocolate is made by their Chocolatier. This guy should have been on the stage. His demonstration was funny and informative and delivered at a pace that made me tired just listening to him. He certainly knows the ins and outs of fine chocolate making but additionally was very proud that he had appeared on British TV and particularly that he had been on Blind Date.

The rest of our visit was spent as free time before all too soon we had to board the coach for the start of our return journey home.

I believe everyone enjoyed the tour and all found the company very satisfying.

Quote from Sue Tattam... .."The trip was a great success and gave me the chance to form new friendships in a wonderfully picturesque and thought provoking place. I learnt so much and brought back many happy memories."

Other Quotes.....

'I thought the trip was excellent, well organised with just the right amount of free time to explore at your leisure. There was plenty of history with lots to see and do'..... 'A well organised trip; comfortable hotel and friendly travelling companions; an excellent Tour Manager and decent weather. What more could we ask for?' 'The trip in total was very enjoyable with good company.'..... 'Bring on the next tour'



Our Happy Group on departure from Bruges

From a personal point of view I found the Tour Itinerary, Hotel and Tour Management to be first class. This was complemented by the excellent company from our U3A Group and also from some of the others participating in the Tour. I found Bruges interesting and learned more about the city from Hannie than I had learned on a previous unguided visit. I found the visit to the Flanders Fields town of Ypres both interesting and very moving. Who could reflect on the happenings of 1914-18 and not shed a tear, particularly when standing near all the graves of the young men cut down so brutally. I kept thinking of the line 'Brave lions led by donkeys'. The 'Last Post' was as always very poignant but I felt it was more so when observed in silence as on a previous visit and with not so many smart phones and tablets being used. I think it fitting to end my piece with the following poem which again is so appropriate to those days of war and sacrifice.

A Bullin. 23 May 2016. With thanks to members for use of their quotations.

In Flanders' Fields

In Flanders' fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders' fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders' fields.

Major John McCrae, 1915

