Venice of the North

BRUGES

A pre-Christmas visit to this mediaeval city

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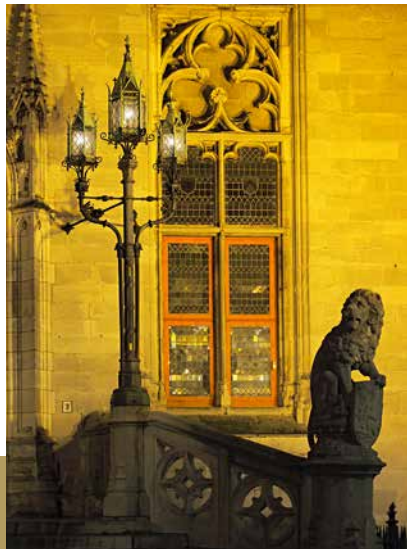


Visit before Christmas to enjoy the festive buzz

Taking a holiday before Christmas can break up that tedious long slog into winter.

Holidays don't always have to be taken in warmer climes, sometimes it's great to get out the warm coats, scarves, gloves, and enjoy a great festive treat. Winter markets in continental cities can provide a great experience and I'm sure they don't come much better that Bruges.

Bruges is a fairy-tale city, magnificent municipal buildings, soaring spires, surprisingly delicate mediaeval architecture, first class museums, endless restaurants and bars, as well as a myriad of colourful and interesting shops, not forgetting the canals that both encircle the city and also thread their way between the buildings, which shimmer colourfully on the evening with Christmas lighting.

What's great about Bruges is that within a seven night stay, there should be enough time to see pretty much all the main bits, leaving you feeling like you 'know' Bruges quite well. Because mediaeval Bruges was originally contained by city walls and canals, it's all very close together and accessible by foot. Luckily, Bruges has managed to hold onto a very large amount of it's mediaeval building stock, in fact it's probably the best preserved city in Europe in this respect.

What I found to be interesting was that the majority of buildings were of brick construction and appear delicate and fragile when you also consider their height and the relatively large windows. The buildings are very decorative, particularly with their *crow-step* gables (*the Belgians call them stair-step gables*). Walking the streets of Bruges is a pleasure (*roads are narrow and generally vehicular traffic levels are low*), and you'll find you can rest up in one of the many pubs and restaurants that have blazing fires, where you can enjoy festive cheer with glowing hands and face. I'd advise taking thermals just in case the wind's blowing from the east, it can get really chilly, so preparation is worthwhile in order to get the most from your visit.

They really do make the effort in Bruges to ensure everywhere's a festive visual treat. Note the fish guild sign over the door on the shop (right).

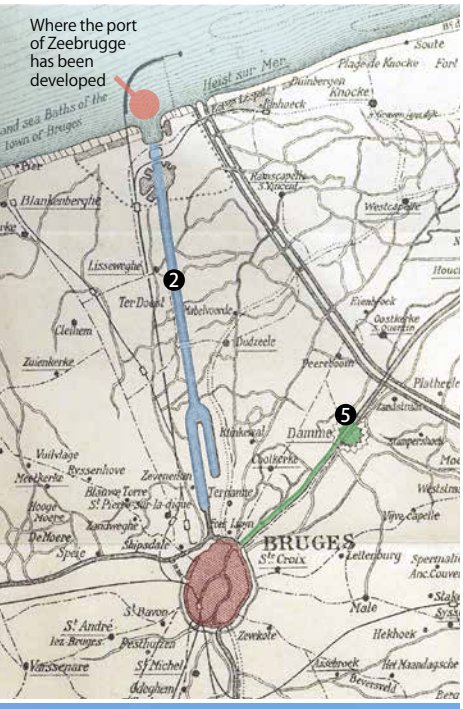
Bruges is situated in the north west of Belgium and is the capital of West Flanders (*see maps overleaf*). In the first millennium Bruges was linked to the sea by what was known as the 'Golden Inlet'.

Bruges golden age was between the 12th to 15th centuries when their woollen industry flourished and they also innovated with new forms of economic exchange and merchant capitalism.

Bruges is certainly a worthy place to visit, small enough to see everything, not so small that there isn't something for everyone, particularly if you like museums and/or shopping and art.

I'll never forget visiting Bruges, not least because we ended up missing the plane back to England - ouch! (*Beware of setting your iphone's alarm on the 12 hour clock , also beware failed hotel wake up calls).*

Editor



A Canal City

Walking round Bruges is a delight, particularly if you appreciate fine architectural detail, as the quality and extent of its existing mediaeval building heritage is extensive.

Often referred to as **The Venice of the North**, Bruges is a canal based city. Originally, a tidal inlet linked Bruges directly to the sea, gradual silting up since 1050 meant that sea access was lost, but in 1134, a storm re-established access through a natural channel at Zwim, navigation to Bruges being via Damme (*see map* ❺), which became the commercial outpost for the city. The port of Zeebrugge (*meaning Bruges on Sea*) was built in 1907, and expanded in the 70-80s to become one of Europe's busiest ports. The main canal linking Bruges to Zeebrugge is the Boudewijnkanaal (*in pale blue on map left* ❷ *and on photo below*) and is a much more direct route to the coast. (*note - the port development of Zeebrugge isn't shown on the map because it's pre 1907*).

The medieval map below shows how Bruges was extensively protected by walls, gate houses ❶ and canals. If you look carefully, you can also see windmills along the walls, the one shown is the Bonne-Chiére windmill ❸

Inside the Provinciaal Hof building. Renowned artists such as Hendrik and Gustaaf Pickery carried out the interior decoration, ironwork and stained glass windows.

One of the many documents residing in the Provinciaal Hof (*see above right*). If you look carefully, you can see that the entire town was enclosed in walls, the canal served as a massive moat.

Bruges Market Square, the imposing Gothic Revival style building is the Provinciaal Hof (Provincial Palace), once used as a government meeting house, it's now a ceremonial building. Inside it is sumptuously decorated (*see image left*). It's worth visiting as there's a collection of interesting documents including the old town map (below left).

Towers & Spires

Whilst you're in Bruges, a visit to the Provinciaal Hof is a must, it's a magnificent building that dominates Market Square, with finely decorated windows and roof line. If anything, the interior is even more ornate (*see photo left*). Their collection of old documents and maps is equally impressive.

Bruges's beautiful skyline gives you an indication of how fabulous cities like London would have appeared pre Blitz and high-rise development. In years gone by, it was a matter of great pride when new buildings were commissioned, with massive budgets allocated to achieve the most aesthetically impressive effect. What's built today really does pale into insignificance.

Bruges has an impressive and unspoilt skyline, as seen here from the embankment where the Bonne-Chiére windmill is situated.

The Carillon in the bell tower in the belfry (*Belfort Van Brugge*) which is situated in Market Square.

Below you can see the Jerusalem Chapel that was built by the Adornes family in 1429. The family still own the Adornes estate 600 years later, having originated from the Italian city of Genoa, when Opicius Adornes joined the retinue of the Count of Flanders in the thirteenth century, when he moved to Flanders to start a new branch of the family.

The Adornes Chapel - the Adornes family have been an important family in Bruges for the past six centuries. The chapel is a unique mediaeval place that I can recommend you visiting.

Mermaid atop a crow-stepped gable (*Dutch call it a stair-step gable*). The Mermaid was always seen to be both beautiful and dangerous. In mediaeval times it was a recognised euphemism for a prostitute.

The restaurant and pubs are so inviting and cheerful, and you're spoilt for choice. The above is in Market Square.

A terrier doing sterling work. Not sure what the owner's doing though?

If you enjoy shopping, the level of retail experience is very high, they're obviously expert in this area, I don't think I've ever seen such pretty window displays as in Bruges.

Above - everything's just so enticing, presentation is superb. Above right - there are so many chocolate shops, it's hard to know which ones sell the high-grade stuff.

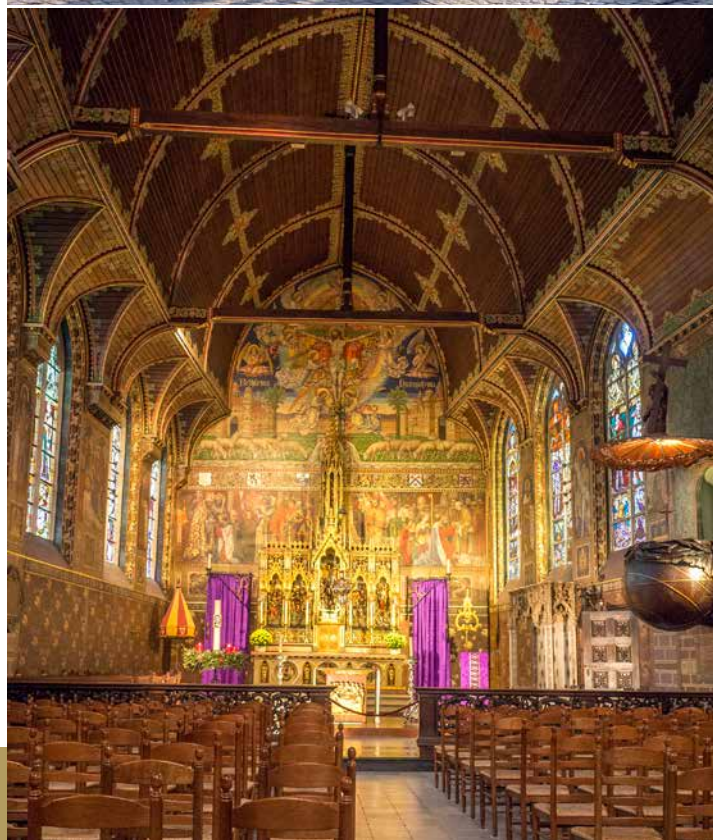
Left - Christmas markets festooned with lighting are pretty, walking round in the evening is and extremely cheerful experience.

The fire's very welcome if there's an east wind blowing, many restaurants and pubs have fires.

Bruges's streets are pretty and the shopping's experience great. Traffic levels are minimal, allowing for relaxed ambling.

Right - horse drawn carriages are available for a brief city tour. There are no big, busy, noisy roads here, many areas are purely for pedestrians.

Above and right - the Basilica of the Holy Blood, incredibly ornate both inside and out. It was originally built in the 12th century as the chapel of residence for the Count of Flanders. It contains the venerated relic of the Holy Blood, allegedly collected by Joseph of Arimathea, which was then brought Bruges by the Thierry of Alsace, Count of Flanders. The building above is the 12th century lower chapel, the image on the right is that of the upper chapel which was rebuilt in the Gothic style in the 16th century.



Bruges is surrounded by canals which were the first commerical super highways that enabled trade to flourish.

The Begijnjof (*Beguinage - housing the lay religious women who lived in the community without taking vows or retiring from the world*).

Judgment of Cambyses - by Gerard David - 1498

Part of a diptych, here the corrupt Persian judge Sisamnes is being flayed after a guilty verdict from judge Cambyses. The other painting shows Sisamnes pre-judgment, sitting on his throne chair. If you look at the scene in the background of the larger image above, it's Sisamnes's own son that is dispensing justice from the throne chair with his father's skin draped over the back. Town burghers used this painting to encourage honesty and it was meant also as a symbolic apology for the imprisonment of Maximilian I of Bruges in 1488. Maximilian I was the Holy Roman Emperor and also known as the King of the Germans. Incidentally, he was never crowned as Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope as the journey to Rome was considered too risky.

Last Judgment - Pieter Pourbus - 1551

This a just a small portion of the whole painting, devised, I don't doubt, to strike fear into worshippers. It was painted for the Council Chamber of the 'Liberty of Bruges, which was an administrative district consisting of the countryside surrounding Bruges. It's said to be inspired by Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel, Rome.

Groeninge Museum

The 4 images above are all sited within the excellent Groeninge Museum in Bruges. If you're going to visit any museums whilst in Bruges, this one's an absolute must because they have a most interesting range of paintings spanning six centuries of Flemish and Belgian art including: Jan van Eyck, Hieronymus Bosch, Gerard David, Adriaen Isenbrandt, Nicolaes Maes, Jan Provoost, Dirk Bouts, Fernand Khnopff, René Magritte, etc.

You really do feel you're in another country, the architecture's very different. What's amazing is the window size. I suppose they weren't subject to our miserable window tax? Note the fine gables.

Church of Our Lady of Bruges. Founded in the 13th century, it has an impressive soaring spire and contains a statue by Michelangelo.

Sky and warm clay tile reflections in the canal make a memorable walking experience, sun allowing.

Last Judgment - Jan Provoost - 1525

Again, this is a smaller part of the main painting. Filled with disturbing imagery, you have to understand the impact this type of image would have had when presented to a public audience having no other access to creative imagery. I say creative, it was obvious the artist went-to-town on his interpretation of the Last Judgment. Don't forget this was the day-and-age of ducking stools, witchcraft, etc, so this painting would have fed the public's fears and suspicions.

Part of Triptych of Job
Hieronymous Bosch
1500-1524

The master of disturbing images, Bosch's image here is another of what would probably be a terrifying image (*small section of main painting shown here*). Bosch certainly had a fertile imagination, today we'd expect this sort of image to appear in a film, rendered in 3d. Here, it was all achieved with just paint and brush.

Herberg Vlissinghe

The oldest pub in Bruges, the Herberg Vlissinghe, and even better, there's none of the small-minded Apartheid of the canine variety here, you can see for yourself a lovely little terrier in the background (*bottom photo*), happily ambling, enjoying the warmth, aromas and possibly titbits of fine food, which is exactly as it should be.

It's a pub worth seeking out because for five centuries this hostelry has welcomed travellers from all over Europe. The atmosphere is friendly and cheerful, the food excellent. Highly recommended on your Bruges visit.