

-1 Journey to the Kingdom of the Sprouts

Belgium is not that far away. If, instead of climbing into that unnatural winged canister, we set off walking instead, the same journey time would have brought us, say, Throckley. Or if we drove, keeping all four wheels in contact with the ground, given reasonable traffic on the A1 we might have arrived at around Scotch Corner. As it was, we made it to Brussels. Brussels is somewhere to the south-east, across water. The last thing we saw, soaring into geography-free space above the clouds, was probably the mouth of the Tees.

To be honest, the journey was not that bad; I was only really frightened on take-off and landing. The cabin staff were charming, all the more so for their almost-but-not-quite-perfect English and their propensity to distribute free ham sandwiches and (admittedly unnaturally small) screw-topped bottles of red wine. In a pocket in front of the seat were pictorial instructions telling us things like not to use mobile phones, or how we should ditch in the sea. I enquire about using my digital camera; this caused some confusion, but eventually I was told that it was OK, but at my own risk. Do digital cameras self-destruct if used on aircraft?¹ All I wanted was another aerial shot of Newcastle and its bridges, but, as usual, the plastic windows were scratched and tram-lined on the outside²

An hour in sunlit space, and then we suddenly plunged down into the murk; a brief glimpse of flat fenceless fields, and we were down, and vomited forth into the bowels of a vast airport. Gleaming corridors with moving walkways stretched into infinity, lined with photographs showing how attractive Belgium really was; huge revolving carousels reuniting luggage to its owners and great multi-level halls with lifts and escalators only lacked Escher's articulated beasts to convey a vision of technological eternity. What was strange was that, at this time of day at least, there were hardly any human beings to people all this vastness.

A brief wave of the passport under the nose of a young enkiosted official, then down a series of escalators, into a subterranean railway station, and then we were carried into the world outside.

The first real glimpse of a foreign country is always telling. How foreign is it really? At first the urban landscape here looked very ordinary; it could almost have been the suburbs of London, only there were rather more shaped gables and steeper rooflines. It was when billboards and notices started to appear that one realises the place has a problem; it has no idea which language to speak. I suppose the majority are in French, but a great many are in English and the remainder, one assumes by default, are in something unfamiliar that must be Flemish.

Brussels was about twenty minutes from the airport. First impressions are of seeking first impressions;

1 But only with a small explosion, sufficient to damage the user but not their neighbours or the structure of the aircraft.

2 How? Is this damage from the beaks of high-altitude sparrows (*Passer domesticus stratosphericus*) trying to solicit crumbs from the ham sandwiches they see aerial travellers consuming.

it takes a while in a place for anything worthy recording to sink in. It is a large city, but it is not quite like what I expected. What were those expectations? Well, everyone knows Belgium is famous for things like chocolate, lace, and Tintin. My first knowledge of its existence came from my stamp collection; Belgian stamps in the 1950s bore the image of a curly-headed man wearing spectacles, who I now realise was their king. He did not wear a crown, or hold a sceptre, so cannot have been a proper king of the English type. More recently the term 'Brussels' has in popular thought transferred from the eponymous small spherical green vegetable to the Common Market aka European Union, a huge bureaucracy that makes rules about the amount of bend in a banana and things like that. So one expects it to be clean, modern, and running like clockwork (or is that Switzerland? Or perhaps Austria?). It is not.

One of the first things that sinks is that the place is largely about human display, predominantly through the medium of the built environment. Display by people who were trying to emphasise their own importance, to posterity and anyone else who happens to be looking. There are two distinct strands in this display, the first is the traditional over-statement, and the second and rather more clever one ironic understatement - perhaps a grudging response to the fact that the first never really works unless ones resources are infinite (ie you are American).

Overstatement hits you at the very centre of the city, in the Hotel de Ville, which in continental-speak here is the Town Hall. Here the power of civic society is being displayed, probably in conscious rivalry against its old adversary in power-games, the religious establishment. The Hotel Ville is a superb and elaborate Gothic building (early 15th century), although inevitably so scraped and restored so that it now looks far less medieval than some of the city's 19th-century churches. It bristles with pinnacles and statuary and towers above a square lined by houses set gable-to-gable, themselves a wonderful series of ornate variations on a late-17th century Baroque theme. Looking across Brussels from a distance, and especially from the higher part of the city to the south-east, the stepped spire of the Hotel de Ville rises above all else, just like the spire of Salisbury Cathedral seen from Old Sarum; was its triple crown-on-crown form a direct challenge to the Pope? Not far away is Brussel's own cathedral; a fine building, cathedral-sized at least in English terms, but nevertheless it seems strangely reclusive; its twin-towered west front stands up grandly above an open area, but from other directions you have to virtually walk into it before you realise it is there.

This display tradition goes on; in the Upper Town are a great assemblage of Classical 18th and 19th century buildings associated with royalty, and many statues; and then, not far away, we come up to date with the soaring steel and glass halls and towers of the European Union complex, all a bit of Crystal-Palace-Revival, supermarket architecture writ immense. The scale is grand, the rows of flags colourful, but a lot of the area still has the feel of a building site.

But then there is the alternative Brussels of tongue-in-cheek understatement, epitomised by the city's mascot, a small boy urinating, the Mannikin Pis³, inspiration of a million totally naff souvenirs. Then

3 More appropriate, considering the state of many pavements, would be, say, a small squatting terrier, the

there is the Tintin Museum, and the cartoons painted on gable ends - perhaps they act as encouragement to the rampant spray-can artists who cover every available surface, and many unavailable ones, with graffiti; these line every railway track, and even, worryingly, extend deep into the tunnels of the Metro. The windows of one train we travelled in were completely opaque on one side; only on leaving did we realise that it must have stopped in a tunnel with a troglodytic graffiti-artist was at work....

But Brussels was always famous for people who were a dab hand with paint. The wholly admirable Royal Art Gallery brings one into close and memorable contact with such luminaries as sundry elder and younger Brueghels, Magritte and even a taste of the distinctly worrying Hieronymous Bosche. Just over the road is the museum of musical instruments in a wonderful Art Deco ex-warehouse called, rather puzzlingly, 'Old England'; this is a case of fine building, fine collection but.... The but is because visitors are given headphones, which are then supposed to play you the sound of each instrument as you stand in front of it - good idea, if it worked. In practise one stands in front of, say, a series of bamboo flutes, and hears a burst of heavy drumming.....the joke wears thin after a while. Also, each music-bite is preceded by a double blast on a playground whistle which simply hurts your ears, and sometimes accompanied by deafening vinyl crackle.. It is also too dark to read the captions (which for once include no English) and there is a very attractive Art Deco lift, which has the singular shortcoming of rapidly attending to your bell-push, but then departing again after refusing to open its doors.

Then a wander out into the city, facilitated by the Metro and tram systems. These are efficient but a little puzzling; one is supposed to buy a ticket and then validate it in a machine at the station, or on the train or tram. In practise these machines are few and far between; observation suggests that they are rarely used, and that 98% of Brusselites either have special concessions or simply travel free. Professional artists have been paid to decorate some of the stations; one has dozens of tin cans and lengths of pipe dangling from its ceiling, another simply spray can doodles on the tile walls which are virtually indistinguishable from the usual unofficial scribblings. I was looking for the Place de Ambroix, which contains one of the city's best Art Deco houses, that figures in all the guidebooks. Sadly the whole place was all a bit run down; a lake in the park has been drained to display a muddy bottom littered with rubbish, and despite the cultural fame of the house a decaying awning hung at a rakish angle across its facade; everything was just a bit too scruffy. The number of beggars on the street too, brandishing polystyrene cups, was reminiscent of Post-Thatcher Britain.

Let's not be too critical. Brussels feels far from the vision of sanitised regulated efficiency its name may project in some minds; if unkempt and strapped-for-euros in parts, you could use words like 'refreshingly ordinary' or even 'friendly'. Food is cheap and relatively OK (glossing over occasional sights like a snail-vending stall); car drivers are manic (but that seems normal for Europe). We went to a French-speaking Protestant church on Sunday, which may have been a mistake; it was actually a

Doggikin Krappe.

Royal Chapel, part of the Palace complex and dating from the time, we were informed, when Napoleon (who of course found no problems in ruling Belgium as well as a lot of other places) decided religious freedom was a good thing. The minister, wearing 'preaching tabs' took the whole service from a pulpit projecting balcony-like from the end wall, at a neck-breaking height amongst a host of plaster cherubs, ten metres above contradiction. In terms of modernity, it had probably made it as far as the late 18th century. No happy-clappiness to be sure, no coffee afterwards either, just a formal handshake on exit. We sat in on the back of a Mass in the Cathedral; that was in Flemish, so even more incomprehensible (we just about recognised the Lord's Prayer) but had four or five people participating in the leadership of the service, and felt a lot more real. Then I wandered into a church (St Catherine's) near our hotel, a great blackened barn of a place, all candles and gloom inside; despite all this they had music playing, and, apart from the French and angelic voices, it was immediately familiar...the songs were all ones we sing at Stepping Stones. A sudden bit of home amongst the strangeness.

The intended highlight of the extended weekend however went badly wrong, and can be passed over in a few sentences. It was a visit to Bruges; Bruges is reputed to be, and clearly is, a wonderful place, and very medieval. One wants to fall in awe and supplication before the humble brick, the things they have done with it here. However we were misinformed first by the (current) guidebook which stated that all tourist sites were open on Mondays (in fact this is the day everything closes) and secondly by the weather forecast map on TV the previous evening, which promised us fried eggs⁴, when in fact we got gloom and steady continuous rain. It was a case of plodge and squelch around, too wet even to take photographs. Antiquarian frustration at a pitch rarely experienced. Fed up. Back to Brussels on the train (trains however efficient swift and cheap) and to a café with, the one redeeming feature of the day, a little tabby cat going round the tables guzzling Parmesan cheese from the bowl on each; the waiters (who had apparently taken on the cat from another café that had closed a fortnight ago) just laughed, so I dispensed part of my salmon steak on the floor beside me to the aforesaid feline, amidst a general air of bonhomie and approval. If cat-friendliness is a true barometer of social progress, Belgium cannot be that bad.

PFR January 27 2003

⁴ Orange sun shining through fluffy clouds, presumably 'sunny intervals'