



A Tale of TWO CITIES

The quaint towns of Ghent and Bruges in Flanders tell you in their own subtle way that leisurely lunches and a laid-back life are not things of the past. **BY PALLAVI PASRICHA**



“MOM AND DAD, I am in love.” I didn’t need to look at their faces to gauge that they were in shock. These words were certainly not what they thought I would greet them with at the airport. In quick succession, and much to their relief, I added that the object of my affection is not a man, but the two picture book towns of Bruges and Ghent in Flanders, Belgium’s northern region and Dutch-speaking part. That’s where I had just returned from, my memory busy with pictures of the quaint streets I had walked, the castles that stood proud, the gingerbread houses that surprised me at every bend...

My first impression of Flanders, however, was far from being colourful. That’s because my trip had started in Brussels, which, in my eyes, was little more than a rhapsody in concrete. But then, Ghent happened, and it took just 45 minutes to change the grey mood that my 48 hours in Brussels had created. I drove through a countryside soaked in the colours of fall—golden, russet, yellow and red. This is the autumn I’d read about so often in books and admired in movies.

It was perhaps natural that the interplay of colours would continue till Ghent, a town that goes back to the medieval period. There was no screeching of cars to assail the senses. And as far as the eyes could see, there were only cobbled pathways and the Lys river. Colourful houses with ornate gables greeted me everywhere as I stepped out for a quick bite. That quick bite lasted a good two hours, and the pleasant weather—neither too sunny nor cold—had a part to play in it. So did the surprise that awaited at the Avalon restaurant, my ‘quick bite’ stop.

I did not believe that healthy food, and that too vegetarian, could be soul-satisfying. But only until I had encountered the no-nonsense fare at Avalon. Rice and Three Vegetables in Cheese Sauce, the dish of the day,

vanished within minutes after being served. I didn’t know if the cheese had anything to do with it but I was in love again (I fell in love a lot on this trip). I was prepared with a polite refusal when it came to dessert. But how could I say no to cheesecake? There was no stopping after that.

Feeling every bit of a stuffed turkey, I wished that a carriage would appear out of nowhere and spare me the exercise I badly needed. But wishes, sadly, are no horses and I had to trudge to the old city centre. I found myself surrounded by winding alleys, with a castle in the distance and a benevolent dragon, more like a guardian angel, perched atop the Belfry Tower. Bells chiming every hour completed the storybook atmosphere.

The day’s itinerary was far from hectic; that, I felt, was beautifully in sync with the pace of life in Ghent. A short walk from the centre took me to Werregarenstraat alley with two walls splattered with graffiti. My head began to spin from the blinding haze of colours. All I needed was a spray paint can to unleash the artist I’m not. But the walls are set aside for Ghent’s student community who use it as a canvas. That, I agreed, is a clever way of protecting the town’s monuments. That the university here offers specialisation in graffiti only shows the high status the art enjoys.

Coming out of the alley and just a little ahead on the same road, my attention shifted to the Town Hall. It boasts mixed architecture—part Gothic and part Renaissance, bringing out the striking contrast of two different periods. Its construction, which began in the late 15th century, was abandoned within a few years when citizens of Ghent refused to pay taxes. It took another 300 years before

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The city centre in Bruges FACING PAGE ABOVE You can't run out of chocolate varieties in Flanders BELOW Minnewater in Bruges OPENING PAGE A charming canvas of Bruges



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PALLAVI PASRICHA

I FOUND MYSELF SURROUNDED BY WINDING ALLEYS WITH A CASTLE IN THE DISTANCE, AND A BENEVOLENT DRAGON PERCHED ATOP THE BELFRY TOWER. BELLS CHIMING EVERY HOUR COMPLETED THE STORYBOOK ATMOSPHERE



TOERISME BRUGGE/JAN DARTHE





PALLAVI PASRICHA

construction was resumed, leading to a marked departure from the Gothic style. Wandering down the same quarter I reached the Belfry Tower, an important symbol in Flemish cities, now on the Unesco World Heritage list. I'd heard much about the views from the top but I skipped the long climb.

A five-minute walk took me to the St. Bavo Cathedral. It rules as the best decorated prayer house in Flanders, thanks to a wealthy bishop who lovingly restored it. Looking at my watch, I suddenly realised that a couple of hours had lapsed. Evening was beginning to set in, and the bracing breeze had begun to bite. But that wouldn't stop me from spending a while on one of the benches on the street. The little corners and houses were all lit up, and a train of speeding bicycles weaved a zigzag pattern in the air. The students were out in groups, adding a buzz to the otherwise laid-back town.

I left my seat at the sight of a vendor selling the hand-held Liege waffle, one of the two varieties popular in Belgium. I wolfed down the golden

A frenzy of colours at Warregarenstraat alley

wonder, coated with burned sugar. My fetish for mustard led me to Tierenteyn-Verlentthat, a shop much known for its pungent handmade mustard. "Would you like to try some," the lady asked. She spooned out a small helping from a wooden drum and I licked it off most eagerly. Within five seconds I was rummaging through my handbag for a tissue to wipe the tears streaming down my face.

Much embarrassed by this, I tried to make up to the lady by asking her to pack some of the deadly stuff. I knew my family would love it.

It is easy to turn into a little child in this town. At least that is what I felt like during the boat ride the next morning. Going under arched bridges, I waved at people on footbridges, an old man fishing in the river and even a wedge of swans that swam ahead of us.

While heading to Bruges, later in the day, I lost my way. Honestly, I'd never felt this happy getting lost. A wrong turn took me down a narrow road, at the end of which lay miles of

F.Y.I

SAY CHEERS TO BEER

You cannot go wrong with beer in Bruges, where you can get more than 400 varieties. There are beers to suit different meal courses, including desserts. The interesting part is that each type of beer has its own unique glass. And if all this does not suit your fancy, take a beer walk where you can taste some of the best ones made in town. Beer cafes are also very popular in Flanders. Bruges will not leave a beer lover complaining.



PALLAVI PASRICHA



COURTESY OF BELGIAN TOURIST OFFICE NYC/USA

The statue of Jacob van Artevelde at the Friday Market of Ghent **BELOW** A boat ride in Ghent

I had sampled almost every kind on offer. My bag was weighing down with the spoils I was taking home.

Call me crazy, but I felt that each house in Bruges reminded me of chocolates, from their colours of deep brown, red, dark brown and beige, to their shape. I skipped the famous lace shops. The designs were exquisite but they were of little interest to me. What you can't escape here in Bruges is history. Anyone with an interest in the subject would notice that almost every house has a story to tell. And that included the hotel I was staying in. The triumphal staircase and some of its halls were built for an official visit by Emperor Napoleon I. He never came, but that doesn't take away from the pedigree of the Hotel Navarra. Later that night, I walked to a café in Grote Market. As I waited for someone to take my order, I heard a voice, *Aap kahan se hain?* I looked up in surprise. It turned out that a person from Mumbai was managing the café.

Antwerp was the next stop, after which I returned to Brussels to only to board the flight back home. I relived some of my Bruges moments as I watched the Colin Farrell-starrer *In Bruges* on the Jet Airways flight. I don't know if it was just luck or a loving soul in charge of the in-flight entertainment system, but I couldn't have asked for a happier ending to my love story. ●

green meadows. A brook ran by the side while a row of countryside houses stood close to each other. Grazing cattle completed the picture. I didn't want to turn back and find my way to Bruges. There was no cheese in the picture, but I was in love yet again.

Driving into Bruges, I felt I was back in Ghent. Such is the striking similarity between the two Flemish beauties. The only difference was the buzz in the Bruges marketplace. While the one in Ghent wore a forlorn look by noon and evening, Grote Market in Bruges was a different story altogether. Peppered with cafes, it was teeming with people basking in sunshine. Standing there I tried to decide whether I should explore the town on foot or on a horse-drawn carriage. I chose the former.

A profusion of chocolateries is the other distinguishing mark of Bruges. The city, after all, boasts a Chocolate Museum. Sadly, I didn't have enough time to visit it. Something should be left for another time, I consoled myself, as I proceeded towards one of the shops. It is easy to spend hours trying to choose the right flavour. Talk about mind-boggling variety. I started with a taste of creamy liquor chocolates and called it quits only after

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE

Fly Delhi-Brussels-Delhi on Jet Airways. **Fare:** Rs. 40,000 (approx). Ghent is a 45-minute drive from Brussels; you could also take trains which run every hour. Bruges is an hour away from Brussels, trains ply every hour.

WHEN TO GO

April to October is the best time to visit Flanders.

PLUS SAYS

STAY

► **Ghent River Hotel**; Waaistraat 5+ 9000, Ghent; tel: +32 0 9266 1010; www.ghent-river-hotel.be

► **Best Western Premier Hotel Navarra**; Sint-Jakobsstraat 41, B-8000; Bruges; tel: +32 0 5034 0561; www.hotelnavarra.com

EAT

Mussels and waterzooi in Ghent.

SHOP

Pick up chocolates and lace from any shop in Bruges.

SEE

Don't miss the canal ride, a visit to Castle of the Counts in Ghent, and the spectacular view from Belfry Tower in Bruges.