



WORDS ELISABETH KING

## HOP TO IT – BELGIUM’S BEER BARONS WON’T WAIT FOREVER

THE centenary of the beginning of World War I has boosted tourism to Flanders over the past couple of years. Almost to the point where former battlefields and cemeteries have become the be-all-and-end-all of a visit to the western half of Belgium. Yet in the Flemish-speaking region centering on Westhoek alone, there are 27 breweries and hectares of hop fields. Flat as a tack, the area is tailor-made for a cycling holiday if you don’t want to appoint a designated driver or get behind the wheel yourself after sluicing down an aromatic brew or four.

I never miss a detour to Bruges every time I go to Belgium. Yes, it’s touristy but the picture-perfect town is World Heritage-listed as the epitome of a prosperous medieval trading centre. Its also home to the Bruges Madonna, the only sculpture by Michelangelo to leave Italy during his lifetime. Nicked by the Nazis during World War II, the recent movie *The Monuments Men*, which tells the story of its rescue from a salt mine in Austria, has renewed interest in the masterpiece. One of the QI-style facts I learned at the Brouwerij de Halve Maan (Half Moon Brewery), a state-of-the-art micro-brewery with a gorgeous cafe perfect for sinking a few of its amber brews. But economics has impacted beer-making in Bruges, bemoaned our guide. The hops the brewery mainly uses now come from the Czech Republic because they are cheaper.

Located in a movie-set alleyway off the main square in Bruges is Staminee de Garre. A classic historic tavern that remains popular with the locals in spite of its global fame on the Internet. Exclusive to the premises is Trippel de Garre, a bold, blond brew served in a fat goblet complete with a

paper lace doily underneath to catch any overflow. Over 100 more beers are up for consideration, so a “quick” visit often takes up an entire afternoon.

Neat villages, farms and fields form the scenic backdrop to a bike ride or drive to Ypres. Famous among English-speakers as Wipers because of British soldiers failure to come to grips with the local pronunciation, the town was the scene of some of the worst

*Trappist beer is synonymous with Belgium and only 10 abbey breweries worldwide are authorised to use the Trappist trademark.*

fighting during the Great War. Every night at 8pm, the Last Post ceremony under the Menin Gate brings tears to every eye.

Ypres was rebuilt after the devastating conflict and its beautiful market square is a textbook case of sympathetic restoration. Close by is the Times bar, where many visitors toast the memories of the soldiers from 50 countries who fought and died in Flanders Fields with Wipers Times, a locally brewed blond ale.

Just outside Poperinge is the Lijssenthoek cemetery, the last resting place of close to 11,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers. In the town itself, you will find the Hop Museum Poperinge, which boasts a “wall

of beer” made up of hundreds of bottles from every province in Belgium. Ensnared in a 19th century storehouse, formerly the municipal hop weighing station, you are reassured that not all the hops used in Belgian beers come from Eastern Europe. The fields surrounding Poperinge produce the lion’s share of the 270-plus tonnes of hops grown in Belgium each year. To see dedication to the ancient crop first hand, head to De Plukker, a family-owned brewery run by organic hop farmer Joris Cambie. The brewery is only open on Saturday afternoons for tastings and it’s well worth customising an itinerary for the chance to sample Keikoppenbier, a top-fermented blond beer.

Trappist beer is synonymous with Belgium and only 10 abbey breweries worldwide are authorised to use the Trappist trademark. A guarantee that a beer is brewed or made under the supervision of monks. Founded in 1831, the Trappist abbey of Saint Sixtus in Vleteren is so globally renowned that it has had to install a large car park with spaces for tour buses. The abbey is out of bounds to visitors but tourists can tour the shrine to the Virgin Mary outside the walls. Across the road is the Cafe In De Vrede, the only place in the world which permanently stocks Westvleteren 12, the abbey’s highest alcohol content beer at 10.2 per cent alcohol. Ranked as the best beer in the world by the website RateBeer.com in the mid-2000s which prompted the mad rush to the abbey brewery. You can buy it online without an atmospheric visit.

Kris Herteleer, the brewer at De Dolle Brouwers (the Crazy Brewers) in the tiny town of Esen uses only hops from

# EM'S TABLE *Organic* & PRESERVATIVE FREE

Poperinge and traditional beer-making equipment. The brewery is open on Sunday afternoons from 2pm with a guided tour in English, which includes one glass of beer. Ask for the oerbier, literally original beer, brewed in small batches in a copper wash kettle. Re-fermented in the bottle, it has a tart, refreshing finish.

Flemish culture is very much on a roll at the moment. The Drop, the highest-grossing Flemish movie of all time, was re-made in the US starring Tom Hardy, the late James Gandolfini, Noomi Rapace and Matthias Schoenaerts. The Antwerp-born hunk reprised his original role in English and has become one of Hollywood's hottest properties with a string of movies to his credit, including the latest version of Far From The Madding Crowd, with Carey Mulligan.

At Diksmuide, it's worth the time to fully acquaint yourself with the on-going divide between Flemish and French speakers in Belgium at the Museum of the Yser. Unlike most museums, a visit starts at the top of the 22-floor building, which offers a panoramic view of the Flanders countryside to the North Sea on a clear day. Apart from detailing the full impact of World War I on Belgium and its people, the museum outlines the history and achievements of the Flemish people in trade, art and invention. Two kilometres away are the recreated trenches and tunnels on the Yser river, where French, British, Commonwealth and German troops slugged it out for four years, often within shouting distance. A truly sobering thought. 🍷



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