

Beer in Belgium can be a religious experience

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ON Day Five of my weeklong Belgian Beer Odyssey back in August, I came about as close to Beer Heaven as one can get. I was riding a bicycle through farm fields in the Hoppeland region in the southwest corner of Belgium, close to the French border and the coastline. I had left the seven other members of my group behind—not that I was riding that hard, but I could feel the pull of our final destination and I couldn't stop smiling. The scenery was beautiful, the sun was shining after a light, warm rain, and I was riding my bike to Westvleteren!

Soon, I came to a low complex of buildings, and I got off my bike at the Abdij St. Sixtus sign to snap some photos of several cars lined up at the Abbey's drive-through sales station. When the rest of my group caught up with me we rode to the Welcome Centre across the street and parked our rides among another 50 or so bicycles. Then we found an empty table outside on the patio, where, finally, we raised a toast before sipping what is considered to be one of the best beers in the world.

Westvleteren 12 (named for the nearby town of the same name) is an Abt/Quadrupel-style beer produced at one of only six Trappist monastery breweries in Belgium (there are 10 worldwide, including two in the Netherlands and two in the United States). Stylistically, it is a strong abbey ale that runs to about 10.5% ABV. Dark brown with a creamy head, it has a soft, velvety body that hides the potent alcohol well. Bitter and chocolatey, with hints of licorice and prunes, it was surprisingly easy to drink on a hot summer afternoon. I also tasted the Westvleteren 6, a delightfully light and fresh blonde ale.

If not the best in the

world, it is at least one of the world's most exclusive beers. St. Sixtus sold a gift pack (six small bottles and two glasses for about \$80) in North America in 2012 to raise funds for renovations to the Abbey, but other than that it is only available right at the source, either at the drive-through store or by the glass at the Welcome Centre. The Abbey asks that the beer not be distributed or resold, but nonetheless, bottles do make their way to liquor stores in North America with exorbitant mark-ups. I first heard of Westvleteren beer several years ago when a private liquor store in Vancouver was selling individual bottles for \$16. I didn't buy any myself but they sold out quickly. The next time they showed up, they sold for \$25 each. The price at the Abbey works out to less than \$2 a bottle.

By the way, if you make your way to Belgium and rent a car intending to load your trunk with Westvleteren 12, be warned that you have to reserve by phone several weeks ahead of time. Of course, this is only possible if someone answers—and they might only speak Dutch (one of the three official languages in Belgium, along with French and German).

I visited Belgium this past August as part of the brand new Belgium Hike, Bike and Beer tour put on by Taste Vacations, a new offshoot of Zephyr Adventures, an American company that packages several active food-and-drink-related tours around the world. I had been on Zephyr's excellent Sonoma Vineyard Walks tour back in 2008, so I was confident this one would be good. I wasn't disappointed.

For beer lovers, Belgium is paradise: it is home to more unique, homegrown styles of beer than any other country in the world. Trappist and Abbey-style beers are on tap in beer cafés and restaurants everywhere, alongside spicy blonde ales and dry, fruity wits and saisons. Add to that a range of sour beer styles,



such as lambic, gueuze, fero and kriek, and—forgive me for stretching the religious metaphor—it might as well be beer heaven.

The six-day tour was ambitious: we started on Sunday afternoon in Brussels with a walking tour that included stops at two excellent bars—one old and one new: a la Bécasse has been serving good beer since it opened in 1877, while Moeder Lambic Fontainas is only about five years old and already regarded as one of the best places in the world to drink beer: "A world-class beer bar," according to Tim Webb's and Joe Stange's invaluable *Good Beer Guide Belgium*, which I cannot recommend enough for anyone planning a trip there. We finished the day off with a beer-soaked meal (literally—all the dishes were prepared with beer) at Restobières.

Monday morning took us to Cantillon, Brussels' only lambic brewery, for an informative and entertaining tour and tasting. Then, we were on the road by van for a two-hour drive to the southeast corner of Belgium, where we enjoyed lunch at Le Chameleux right next to

the French border and then hiked an hour through the woods to the Abbaye Orval, home to another Trappist brewery. After touring the Abbey's ruins and its modern museum, we tasted the fabulous Orval beer at the café just outside the monastery. While Orval is readily available in private liquor stores in BC, it was special to taste it right at the source, especially since it is the only place on Earth where one can taste the fresh version on draft before it's bottle conditioned with *Brettanomyces* yeast. The difference is pronounced: the *jeune* version is hoppy, bright and malty, such a contrast from the world-famous dry and funky *gout d'Orval* found in the *vieille* version. After Orval, another fabulous beer-paired dinner awaited us that evening at our aptly named Hotel Cosy in Bouillon.

Day Three, Tuesday, started with a morning hike and ended with another excellent meal at the Leffe Museum at the Hotel La Merveilleuse in Dinant. On Wednesday, we visited a small co-op brewery called Brasserie Brootcorrens in Erquellines before riding bikes along a winding river to the town of Gozée, where we ate lunch and then visited the Brasserie du Val de Sambre at the ruins of the Abbaye d'Aulne. That evening, we stayed at the Het Anker Brewery's hotel in Mechelen.

On Thursday, after riding bikes to St. Sixtus, we drove to Bruges, which is one of the most beautiful medieval towns in Europe. There, we ate dinner and sampled beers at Bierbrasserie Cambrianus and wandered over to the Café 't Brugs Beertje, another world famous beer spot. I wanted to stay in this cozy little two-room bar for the rest of the trip, but other great destinations and activities beckoned.

Friday morning we tasted champagne-style beers at

Malheur in Buggenhout before we once again got on the bicycles to ride along the Scheldt River before driving to Ghent, which turned out to be even more striking than Bruges because of the diversity of building styles lining any given street or canal. We visited Gruut, a brewery that produces beers without hops, and feasted at the Belga Queen.

The tour ended the next day with a return drive to Brussels. I had another evening on my own in the capital so I returned to Moeder Lambic and checked out a few other spots recommended in the *Good Beer Guide Belgium*: Poechenellekelder, a puppet-themed bar within sight of the Mannekin Pis, the famous statue of a peeing boy in the heart of Brussels that draws hordes of tourists; and Nüitnigenough, a tiny restaurant where I outlasted some impatient American tourists waiting for a table and enjoyed an outstanding meal and some amazing beers: dry-hopped Saison Dupont paired with salted Gruyère—wow!

All in all, this tour was a great introduction to Belgian beer, but by no means was it comprehensive. We didn't get to Antwerp at all, for instance, nor did we visit any breweries that specialize in saisons, but what we covered in six days was incredible. I feel like I got a strong sense of Belgian culture, its beer and food scene, the landscape and geography, and, of course, I drank a lot of great beer! The only negative for me, really, is that I'd prefer to have a little more time to explore things on my own. But then again, I can do that next time I go, and I guarantee I will go to Belgium again. If you'd rather not worry about planning your own trip to Belgium, then a tour like this is a great way to go, except perhaps build in a few extra days at the end to explore.



GETTING THERE

Air Canada direct to Brussels from Montreal with connections from Vancouver, Victoria and other BC airports. Or... Direct from Vancouver to Amsterdam or Paris and then a fast train to Brussels (2.5 hours from either).

GETTING AROUND

Belgium itself is not a very large country, so it is easy to travel by train, bus or car.

- The highway system is excellent and easy to navigate.
- Biking is also a great option—there are cycle routes everywhere, many following picturesque rivers or canals.
- Brussels has an underground metro system, so it's easy to get around, and the city centre is very walkable.

BELGIUM WEBSITES

Taste Vacations: taste-vacations.com/belgium
Belgium Beer Tourism: belgium.beertourism.com

IN BRUSSELS

A la Bécasse: alabecasse.com
Cantillon Brewery: cantillon.be
Hotel Welcome: hotelwelcome.com
Moeder Lambic: moederlambic.com
Nüitnigenough: nuetnigenough.be
Poechenellekelder: poechenellekelder.be
Restobières: restobieres.eu

OUTSIDE BRUSSELS

Abbaye Orval: orval.be
Abbaye St. Sixtus: sintsixtus.be
Belga Queen: belgaqueen.be
Bierbrasserie Cambrianus: cambrianus.eu
Brasserie Brootcorrens: brasserie-brootcorrens-erquellines.be
Brasserie du Val de Sambre: valdesambre.be
Brasserie Malheur: malheur.be
Café 't Brugs Beertje: brugsbeertje.be
Gruut: gruit.be
Hommelhof: hommelhof.be
Le Chameleux: lechameleux.be



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