

Ghent - Belgium's Best Kept Secret

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Ghent, East Flanders, Belgium
Monday, June 20, 2016

Who knows? Have patience. Go where you must go, and hope! — J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings

Saturday 18th of June 2016

Time again for us to tramp off to the railway station about 1 km away. Luckily the rain held off. Soon we were on the train to Koblenz which follows the left bank of the Mosel River valley most of the way. The Mosel joins the Rhine at Koblenz and we followed the Rhine northwards on the next leg to get to Koeln (Cologne). We made a good connection at Koeln to get to Bruxells (Brussels), where we had our last change to finish in Gand - St. Pierre Station (Ghent).

Phew! Everything worked without any issues at all today. The countryside has changed from hilly river valleys to very flat farmland - but as usual in Europe, everything is so lush and green.

We had a late lunch snack at the station before we walked the 1.5 km to our accommodation - Garden in the City, an apartment set in the Kunstenquartier (arts/museum district) near the university. The wheels on Brad's suitcase started making some funny noises on the way - hope they survive until we get back home.

Our loft-studio style apartment is on the 2nd floor up a very narrow, steep staircase and has a very quirky feel - and it is comfortable and well equipped. This part of town has a "gritty" feel and is quite busy with students milling about and we think Belgium must have won the soccer as there were cars driving about with Belgian flags flying and young men and women hanging out the windows yelling out and drivers tooting horns.

We were both tired so bought some supplies at the mini-mart next door and ate in.

Just a note regarding the spelling and pronunciation of "Gent". We have seen it spelled as Gent, Ghent, and Gand. It can be pronounced as Gent with a hard "g", or Zhent with a soft "g", or as Hand with a silent "g". This is probably due to Dutch and French differences and English interpretation.

Rode on 4 trains; walked 7km. Some rain, about 19 degrees.

Sunday 19th of June 2016

We were quite tired yesterday so we had a relaxed start to the day before heading off map in hand for the 1.6 km walk to the old part of Ghent. We walked through the student club scene - never pretty on a Sunday morning, but the scenery improved as we headed north past narrow lanes and old buildings, then all of sudden we crossed a canal and we were in the famed Ghent Historisch Centrum. Apparently Ghent was once the second largest city in Western Europe after Paris, as it was a very important port. The town was served by a canal which over time became blocked with silt and its importance as a port diminished.

However, the buildings from those times have survived, and it is this fact that makes this place so interesting. The town is set on canals, so the best way to see it is by boat, so that's what we did. The skipper was very informative and busy - he did commentaries in Dutch, French and English while steering the boat and seemingly without looking ahead very often. We continued our exploration on foot, sampling some local delicacies including Ghent Old Mans Noses, a cone shaped purple jelly bean like sweet. We tried to find a waffle stand but were unsuccessful today. Later we walked back along a canal to our accommodation for a rest and once again ate in.

At about 8:45 pm, we caught a bus back to the Centrum hoping to capture the sunset on the 4 churches surrounding the 3 market squares in town. This stretch of Ghent is known as Medieval Manhattan. We got there a little late as the sun had disappeared behind some buildings, but we got some great photos anyway. It was still light at 10:45 pm (we later figured out we were only 2 days from the longest day).

We finished up viewing the sites and returned home by bus.

Cloudy with a sunny afternoon. No rain for a change. 19 degrees. Walked 11 km.

Monday 20th of June, 2016

We woke up to rain - again. We were planning on going to Bruges today, and a little rain isn't going to stop us. We were going to catch a tram or bus to the station, but couldn't figure out which one to catch, so we walked and only got a little drizzle on the way. The train had us in Bruges in about 25 minutes, where we caught a bus into the Centrum (old part of town). Wow. We were impressed with Ghent but this up another level - except that it is raining steadily and full of tourists! Raincoats on, hoods up over heads, we headed off and before long we found a waffle stand. These are traditional delicacies in Belgium and are very nice. We ate them under a tree next to the Burg square which has the town hall and Basilica of the Holy Blood, sheltering from the rain. An executive decision was made to take a bus tour around town to get out of the rain - a very good idea. We got to see a lot of the town's features and attractions, but there were some pedestrian only areas not accessible to the bus. In some sense is similar here to Ghent - an old trading port which had become stranded by silted canals (both Ghent and Bruges are still ports, with huge canals serving new ports out of town. Bruges is more genteel than Ghent. After our tour, it was still raining steadily. We had some more culinary research to perform. Apparently Belgium invented French fries. The story goes that American soldiers in WWII

thought they were in France when they were first exposed to these fries and so they became French fries, which probably rolls off the tongue better than Belgian fries. Anyway, the fries we had were excellent - properly cooked so that they were crisp on the outside and soft and fluffy on the inside. The fries are dipped in mayonaise in the Belgian style. Yum!

A debate ensued as to whether we should walk or catch the bus back to the railway station. Someone thought it would be good to walk. We got saturated. We were able to dry off a bit in the train and finally got back home to our warm and dry apartment.

We had a local style pizza for tea - a pizza ring with topping, the middle filled with chips and salad.

Weather terrible - the wettest day so far. Walked 6.3 km.

Tuesday 21st of June 2016

We were told by our host last night that it wasn't going to rain today, but it seems he might be wrong. It's overcast and the ground is wet. We head off to the bus stop and it started to rain again. Luckily we didn't have to wait long and were soon on our way. Because of the rain, we planned to visit the MIAT (Museum of Industry and Textiles) in the north side of old town - an area we haven't explored yet. It was quite interesting at the museum as it covered the main industries in Gent over the years - shipping in cotton and wool to be processed into material and then into clothing, curtains, wall paper, etc. Apparently Ghent was the "Manchester of Europe" in the 18th and 19th centuries. The rain finally cleared as we left the museum and walked towards the main square. We had lunch at a cafe overlooking the main canal, and yes, we sat down to find out the people next to us were from Brighton, Victoria. It's a small world indeed.

I had the best fish soup I've had - it's a local dish called waterzooi. Anna had a nice salad with goats cheese wrapped in bacon. After lunch we decided to have another Belgian waffle because we enjoyed the last ones so much. We got a bit of a shock when told they were 10 euros each! (about \$15). Too late to back out now. Tip to self - check price before ordering in a tourist zone.

We meandered our way back to our apartment and had our final night in continental Europe finishing off our snack supplies for tea.

Weather overcast and raining at times. Walked 10.4 km.

Comments

We had a week in Ghent in 2013 and loved it. The architecture was wonderful. We stayed in a basement appt near Vrijdagmarkt. Looking out the high windows was interesting- all I could see were legs walking by.

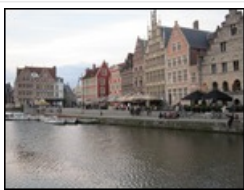
I was standing on St Michael's bridge looking at the canal and it looked familiar. I took a photo and when I got home I found I had taken a photo from exactly the same spot when I was there in 1977, 36 years previously! What a memory! Looking forward to comparing notes. When are you back?

— From John Brennan, on Jun 24, 2016 at 03:46AM

Back on Sunday 📷📷

— From Brad McArthur, on Jun 24, 2016 at 02:46PM

Pictures & Video



Ghent - main canal area



Medieval Manhattan - Ghent



Various modes of transport -Ghent



Gravensteen Castle - Ghent



Canal Tour - Ghent



Brugges Belfry



Main square in Bruges



Waffle time - Bruges
Comments!



Bruges



Great weather for ducks -
Bruges



Canal scene - Ghent



Interesting sculpture -
Ghent



Ghent - main canal area

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Medieval Manhattan - Ghent

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Various modes of transport -Ghent

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Gravensteen Castle - Ghent

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Canal Tour - Ghent

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Bruges Belfry

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Main square in Bruges

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Waffle time - Bruges

Comments:

My mouth is watering for those waffles!

— From Anne H, on Jun 24, 2016 at 12:19AM

Yes, they are delicious. Definitely a "sometimes" treat.

— From Brad McArthur, on Jun 26, 2016 at 11:04AM

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Bruges

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Great weather for ducks -Bruges

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Canal scene - Ghent

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Interesting sculpture - Ghent

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