

**Friendship Force Limburg, Belgium
Journal: May 28-June 9, 2024**

Thursday May 30: Amsterdam
Submitted by Joan Hale

We started our day off with a wonderful hardy breakfast at the hotel, Prins Henrik. The adventure began with a one-hour Canal cruise. We learned a lot about the history of Amsterdam and saw some beautiful architecture. We saw many houseboats in the canals and in a big lake at the end.

We came back for lunch at the hotel and then went on a two-hour, 4 km, walking tour by a very enthusiastic knowledgeable guide. His name was Wendy and was big into history. We learned a lot about the Netherlands and Amsterdam.
Belgium photos

We walked for quite some time to find a restaurant that was recommended by our guide from the walking tour. We found it, but it wasn't going to be suitable for us as it was a takeout, and it was cooler outside. We decided to eat at a Thai restaurant in Amsterdam. Rather unusual, but the food was excellent.

The evening was a special surprise. Our cruise in the morning had difficulty with the earphones. As we had booked at our hotel, we mentioned it to the person at the front desk. He said that wasn't acceptable and called the company. They gave us tickets for another cruise. So off we went. The route was different and the commentary worked very well.

We went back to the hotel to call it a night. Then decided at the last minute we would go and explore the Red Light district. There were many ladies of the night performing their duties. Even spent some time learning about the contents of a large sex shop.





**Friday May 31: Trip to Zaanse Schans, Edam, Volendam
and Marken from Amsterdam**
Submitted by Joanne Bernier

After asking many people for directions, Joan, Ann and I arrived at the bus in De Ruijterkade at 8 a.m. Our first stop was Zaanse Schans where we walked for a considerable distance to visit many windmills. We also bought some cheese in the gift shop.

Our second stop was Edam where many of us bought more cheese, crackers and souvenirs. We heard all about the cheese-making process, as well as clog-carving from a delightfully funny instructor.

From there we continued to Volendam, which is a beautiful little town on a beautiful lake. After walking to the end of the main street, which seemed to be a long peninsula, we found a lovely pub where we ordered a beer and chatted with a girl from Germany. I

thought we should pay for our beer, only to realize that we had three minutes to get to the bus which was approximately 10-15 minutes away. I told the girls to run ahead while I paid the bill. I haven't run that far, that fast in years. It took us 10 minutes, and fortunately the bus waited for us. It was most embarrassing!

Our last stop was another delightful very old village of Marken, which was an island at onetime and it was built up with dykes to prevent all the houses from being flooded. It was pretty and unique because all the houses were painted black or green. I almost missed the bus again because I stopped to get an ice cream cone with two other people from our bus and we followed the wrong group of tourists through the town to the far end and had to go all around to the other end to find our bus. Fortunately, the man and his son found the bus for me.

It was a tiring day, because we put in many steps, but it was a great adventure – and the scenic and educational rewards far outweighed the fatigue!



Saturday June 1: Arrival in Belgium Submitted by Anne Garrett

Claire, Rhéal, Bob, Karen, John, Sandra, Joanne, Joan and I enjoyed another good breakfast at Amsterdam's Prins Hendrik hotel. Some of us also packed a sandwich for lunch on the train. At 10:20am, we left the hotel and walked about 5 minutes, dodging bicycles and trams, to the train station where we escalated up to platform 14 to catch the Eurostar to Brussels, joining Paul and Marian there. The 11 of us were seated in 4 different coaches....seems odd.

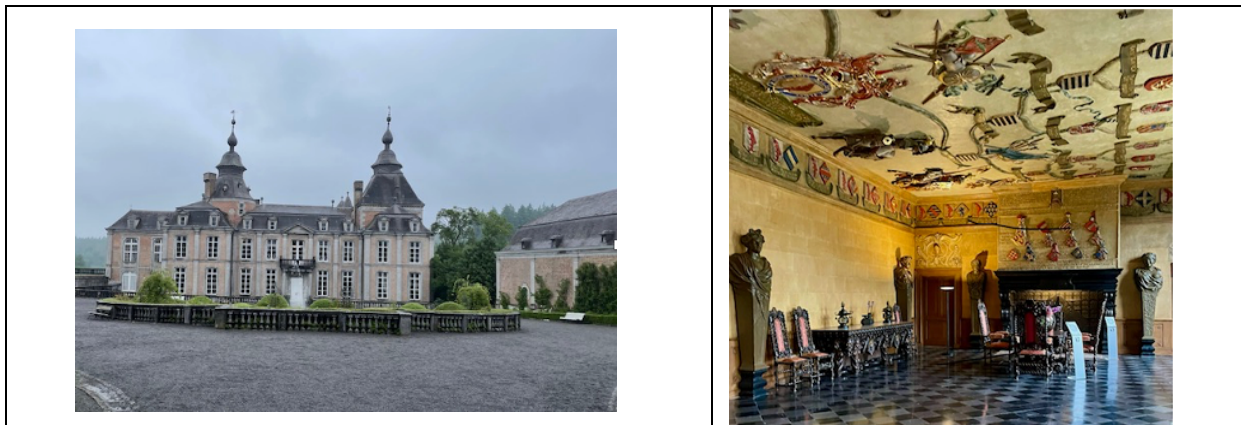
At Brussels-Midi, we were met by Christine and Arthur and welcomed by this sign.



Sunday June 2: Chateau de Modave Belgium Submitted by Marian and Paul Beauregard

We started Sunday June 2nd with a visit to the Chateau de Modave which was very well preserved even though it was built in the 1600's. What is notable about this castle is that it has lots of period furniture as well and a restored grand piano in an upstairs gallery. There were gorgeous beds, some of a great size and a state-of-the-art kitchen down below. The audio guides were able to give us background information and made the visit match more worthwhile.

On the afternoon of June 2nd, we visited the town of Durbuy for lunch and had time to wander the village and shops. The village is built into a valley with interesting rock faces and is very popular with tourists. Some of the shops displayed artisan work such as leatherwork, jewellery and clothing.





Monday June 3: Bela Orta & Strawberry Farm
Submitted by Karen Laurin

We left in the morning for Borgloon, the fruit growing section of Belgium. We had a tour of Bel Orta. This means beautiful garden. They sort and process and then auction the varieties of fruit. Apples, pears, strawberries, currants and raspberries and several varieties of each. It was a busy distribution depot.

We left there and had lunch at Konak restaurant. After a great lunch we went to the strawberry farm. It was very interesting. They grow the strawberries off the ground. Hanging row by row. We got to sample a few delicious berries. They also grow raspberries and blackberries. We had a cake and coffee break and travelled on to a little church. This church overlooked the countryside and was made of metal. 'Read between the lines' a truly holy church. Very unique and picturesque. Overall, I would say it was a great enjoyed by all.



Tuesday June 4: Free Day, World War I Experience
By Sandra Train

As today was a free day with our hosts, all the members of our group engaged in different ways. John had expressed an interest to our hosts, before we arrived, on seeing some part of the first World War area, and memorials. John had attended General Mercer public school in Toronto. The school which celebrated its hundredth year in 2023 which John and I attended, was named after General Malcolm Mercer, the highest ranking officer to be killed during the war. Mercer was buried in Belgium.

Malcolm Smith Mercer



Born 17 September 1859



To mark the school's 100th year, arrangements were made to have tributes laid at his grave.



We also visited his grave.

So our free day was a World War I experience. It had been arranged that we would drive to Bruges to a B&B and leave our bags before continuing onto Passchendaele where we toured a war museum and saw how the men fought in the trenches and existed living underground. It is now a beautiful fertile landscape, such a sharp contrast to what was there then.

We continued on to Lijssenhoek military cemetery, the resting place of General Mercer. From 1915 until 1920 the hamlet of Lijssenhoek became the biggest evacuation hospital in the Ypres Salient. The cemetery contains 10,784 burials. The remembrance wall in the visitor centre shows 100s of portraits - faces behind the gravestones. What struck us most was how young most of them were.



Our war experience was completed by a moving ceremony at the Menin Gate- a huge war memorial where the last post is played every evening at 8 PM. The walls are covered with names of those who died in Belgium. Not only the bugle players but pipes and drums were present along with hundreds of spectators, including at least four coach loads of high school students. A very moving experience as wreaths of poppies were laid by various groups and dignitaries.

Many thanks to Gaston and Marie Jean for allowing us to have this special experience.

Wednesday June 5, 2024: Bruges, The Venice of the North
Submitted by Helen Manning

At 11:50 am, we arrived in Bruges after a 3 hour train trip. Belgium is not as small as it looks on the map!

We met our day host/guide, Jean-Marie Defreigne who explained a little of the history of Bruges. The name means port and back in the 12th Century it was an important centre of wool and cloth trade. Unfortunately, by the end of the Middle Ages, the river silted in and Antwerp took its place.

We entered the Beguinage, a city within the city founded in the 13th century by women – but they were not nuns. It is now a World Heritage Centre.

There are two symbols associated with Bruges. First is the Swan. One of two legends says that the emperor took revenge on the citizens when they assassinated his friend Peter “Longneck”. His curse forced the city to keep swans (long necks) for eternity or else it would fall into ruin.

The second symbol is the Belfry Tower that watches over Market Square which is the heart of the city. In the past the bell was used to warn of invasions and fire.

Burg Square is considered the soul of Bruges because of its administrative buildings. During our tour Jean-Marie explained the various types of architecture that we see in the buildings. Romanesque with rounded arches, Gothic with pointed arches and Neo-gothic with (I forget. Ha ha ha).



In addition to touring the two squares we cruised the canals on a tour boat.

This beautiful and informative day with Jean-Marie ended with a long and relaxing train ride home.

BRUGES PHOTOS



Jean Marie FF Limburg Day Guide



Bruges Swans (& ducks)



Bruges Beguinage Houses



Bruges our tour boat on the canal



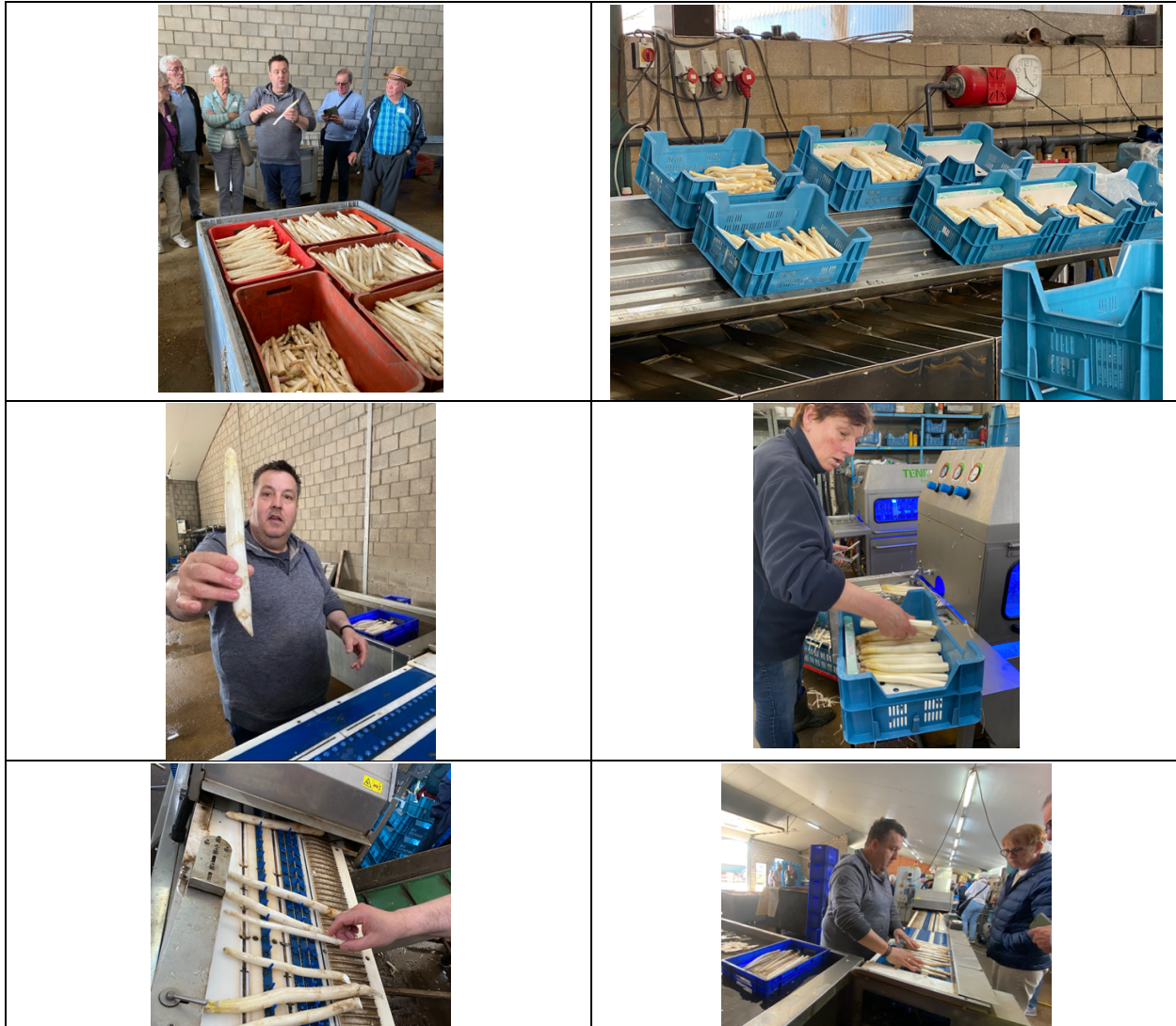
Bruges Restaurants on Market Square



Bruges, City Hall on Burg Square

Thursday June 6, 2024: Asparagus Farm and the “White Town” of Thorn
Submitted by Peggy Mueller

We were welcomed by the Drissens family, owners of the asparagus farm. We were served coffee and tea and treats while Johan presented an interesting film and speech about asparagus farming and processing lines.



At the De Spaanjerd we had a delicious lunch. There were beautiful iron decorations with many plants.

We spent the afternoon in the town of Thorn aka White town because most of the quaint buildings were painted white . The roads were cobble stone. The old abbey church, also white had white columns and a magnificent ceiling.



Our evening was spent with our home hosts.

Friday June 7: School for Training Dogs, Tongeren, Farewell
By Sharon Meilleur

Our last day had three memorable events. First was the visit to the brand new building that would house the dog training school. Dogs are trained to lead the blind. Then we spent the afternoon touring the town of Tongeren.



Medieval wall on top of Roman wall

Finally, the farewell dinner and entertainment.



Many thanks to Sonja & the Friendship Force of Limburg for a wonderful week!

