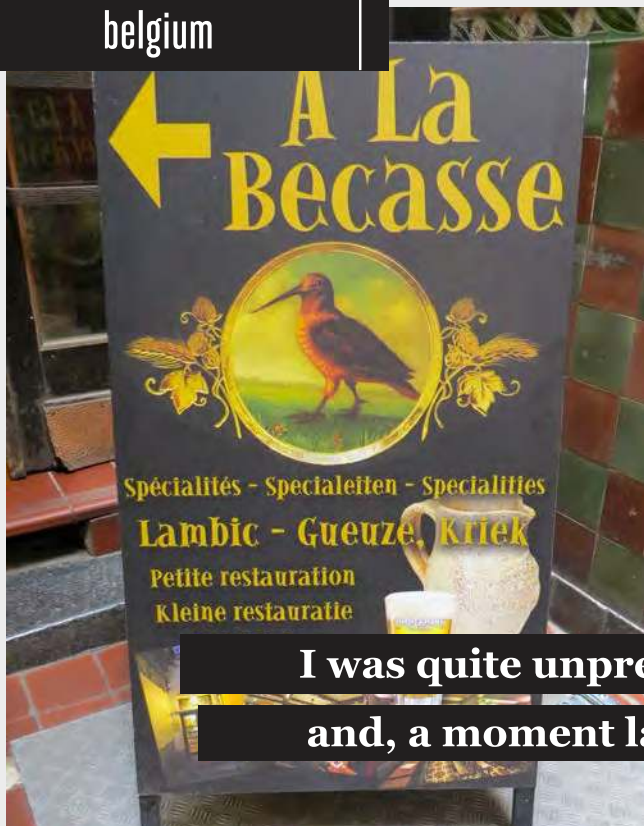


BEEER HUNTING IN BELGIUM

- Joe Wiebe -



*In Belgium a Beer Hunter
can never rest on his barstool*



I was quite unprepared for the richness of the brew and, a moment later, the hit of alcohol, somewhere around the top of my head

In the Introduction to his *Great Beers of Belgium*, the famed British Beer Hunter, Michael Jackson, describes his first encounter with Belgian beer while working as a journalist in the Netherlands in the 1960s. He had travelled to a southern town close to the Belgian border to check out a Carnival festival. Stepping out of the train, Jackson found a street party in full swing, and he immediately joined in the fun. “Amid the endless golden glasses of Dutch lager, someone wearing a John Lennon mask handed me a chalice containing a darker beer. Caution long to the winds, I took a gulp. I was quite unprepared for the richness of the brew and, a moment later, the hit of alcohol, somewhere around the top of my head.” The man in the mask told him it was a Trappist beer, and said, “If you like that sort of thing, you are in the wrong country. You really ought to go across the border.” The next day, “hungover and bedraggled,” he did just that, and discovered an undiscovered country. As he concludes the Introduction: “In Belgium a Beer Hunter can never rest on his barstool.”

I finally had the opportunity to follow in Jackson’s footsteps last summer as part of the Belgium Hike, Bike & Beer tour offered by Taste Vacations, a new offshoot of Zephyr Adventures, an American company that offers several active food-and-drink-related tours around the world. Over the course of six days in early August, our eight-person group—five American guests, two guides and me—travelled around Belgium by van, visiting breweries, abbeys and beer-focused restaurants everywhere we went, with hikes and bike rides mixed in to balance out the calories we were consuming. It was an excellent overview of Belgian beer culture; a tantalizing

first taste of what I hope will be many more Belgian adventures for this beer hunter in the future.

The first day was spent walking in the capital city of Brussels sampling different beers here and there and enjoying a bit of a history lesson from our Belgian guide, Sacha, that helped show how completely integrated beer is in Belgian culture. For instance, a fresco sculpted on the side of the Bourse, the Stock Exchange Building, depicts babies making beer and one of the most beautiful buildings lining Brussels’ famous Grand Place is the Maison des Brasseurs, dating back to 1698, which also features babies making beer along with golden hop vines encircling pillars.

At A La Becasse (est. 1877), we ducked out of a sudden thundershower to enjoy our first beer samples—St. Feuillien Blonde and Trappist Rochefort 8—paired with cheeses. When the sun returned, we walked to Moeder Lambic, which specializes in lambic and gueuze, indigenous beer styles that are traditionally produced only in Belgium (just as champagne is unique to France). One of the wait staff, Lionel, led us through a very entertaining degustation (tasting session) of several different beers, lambics and others. We finished the evening off with a great meal at Restobières, where the menu famously features beer-infused dishes.

Monday morning began with a trip to the Cantillon Brewery, the only lambic brewery in Brussels (see sidebar). Then we boarded the van and drove a few hours southeast. We ate at a restaurant called Le Chameleux, mere steps from the French border, and then hiked a forest trail for an hour, emerging at the



Abbaye Orval, one of Belgium's six Trappist breweries. The brewery itself is not accessible to the public, but we explored the old Abbey's ruins and its new brewing museum before visiting the café, the only place in the world where you can taste the 'jeune' version on draught alongside the 'vieille,' which is bottle-conditioned with *Brettanomyces* yeast. The young beer has a fresh, hoppy brightness but as it ages in the bottle, the hops fade into the background and the malt body dries out, creating the famous 'goût d'Orval.' Tuesday began with a morning hike and ended with an excellent meal at the Leffe Museum in Dinant. On Wednesday we visited a small co-op brewery called Brasserie Brootcorrens in Erquellines before enjoying a riverside bike ride to Gozee, where we 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.

Thursday marked one of the high points of the trip for me: a bike ride through hop fields in the southwest farming region called Hoppeland that culminated in the chance to taste one of the world's most elusive beers, Westvleteren 12, at the Welcome Centre at the St. Sixtus Abbey. The van took us to Bruges late that afternoon and we ate dinner and sampled beers at Bierbrasserie Cambrinus before wandering over to the Café 't Brugs Beertje, another world-famous beer spot. I could easily have stayed in this cozy little bar for the rest of the trip, but other great beers and activities were still to come.

Friday morning found us tasting champagne-style beers at Malheur in Buggenhout before a bike ride along the Scheldt River. Then we drove to Ghent, where we visited Gruut, a brewery that produces beers without hops and feasted at the very fancy Belga Queen restaurant. If Bruges is famous for its medieval architecture, Ghent is

perhaps even more striking because of the diversity of old building styles all jumbled together along its streets and canals.

The tour ended on Saturday with a return trip to Brussels but my flight home was on Sunday morning, so I had time to check out a few more spots recommended in CAMRA's Good Beer Guide Belgium by Tim Webb and Joe Stange (which I cannot recommend enough). Located right next to the Mannekin Pis, the famous statue of a peeing boy that draws hordes of tourists, Poechenellekelder has an excellent beer list and an amazing collection of puppets decorating its interior. And at a tiny bistro, Nuëtnigenough, I waited in line behind an impatient family of Americans who eventually gave up and enjoyed a very memorable meal, including an appetizer of salted Gruyère cubes paired with dry-hopped Saison Dupont—just incredible.

Taste Vacation's package tour is a great way to sample Belgian beer culture, but going independently would also be fun and easy. Air Canada flies direct to Brussels from Montréal. Another good option is to fly to Amsterdam or Paris and take a train the rest of the way. Belgium is a small country that is easy to get around by train, car or bicycle. Nearly everyone speaks English, as well as French, Flemish Dutch and often German. Beer, food and accommodations are on par with Canadian prices, perhaps a little more due to the Euro exchange. -JW

Taste Vacations:

www.tastevacations.com/belgium/

Belgium Beer Tourism:

<http://belgium.beertourism.com/>

A Visit to Cantillon

For beer geeks, no trip to Brussels would be complete without going to Cantillon, the city's only lambic brewery. Lambic refers to spontaneously fermented sour beers that are aged for three or more years and then often blended into gueuze. Fruit may also be added to the barrels, creating various styles such as kriek (sour cherries) or framboise (raspberries). The results are tart and dry, not sweet at all, as the *Brettanomyces* yeast and *Lactobacillus* bacteria slowly consume the fermentable sugars.

Our group's tour was led by Alberto Cardoso who helms the brewery's tasting room. His description of the brewery's equipment and techniques was thorough to say the least, but his intelligence and quick wit kept even our jet-lagged brains from growing bored. We learned that Cantillon has followed the same brewing method pretty much since it opened in 1900, utilizing airborne yeast and bacteria to naturally 'infect' the wort as it cools in open vats known as coolships. "Brussels was founded in a swamp," Alberto said, "so there is a very specific biotype. We can never delocalize our brewery because that would mean we are changing our yeasts."

The beer is fermented slowly in barrels for up to three years before being bottled or blended. In reference to the cobwebs clearly seen throughout the barrel room, Alberto explained that spiders catch fruit flies that carry bacteria that can convert the alcohol to vinegar, adding, "We are not a vinegar factory."

The building has no heating or cooling equipment beyond the boiler used in making the beer and a fireplace in the tasting room where they burn chopped up old barrels in the colder months. A visit there truly feels like a step back in time to another era.

The Cantillon Brewery and Museum is open to the public during the day Monday to Saturday; self-guided tours cost €7 (one glass of beer included), and guided tours for groups can be arranged in advance. Various bottles and swag are also available for sale.

Consult their website (www.cantillon.be) for more information.



(tour leader Alberto Cardoso)



taps

[the beer magazine]



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

march / april

- **Border Town Beer**

Detroit, Michigan

- **The 19th Hole**

Craft beer hits the greens

- **Beer and Whiskey**

A perfect pair

- **Chef Michael Olson**

Be the master of your own beer universe

