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CELEBRATOR/n.

(From the verb celebrate) 1: To make widely known or famous. 2: To observe a notable occasion, festival or event. 3: To honor by ceremonies or rites. 4: Name of a superb German Doppelbock imported by Merchant du Vin Corporation and source of much inspiration. 5: Name of America's premier bimonthly newspaper. Cheers!

Photo by Arlene Dalldorf



BELGIAN BEER TOUR

CELEBRATOR READERS GATHER IN BELGIUM

By Tom Dalldorf

The flight from California to Brussels is grueling, but the reward is that you arrive in Belgium, land of world-class beer, brewing and beer service. Some 28 beer enthusiasts joined us on the *Celebrator* Belgian Beer Tour, held April 22–26, 2015, and organized by the capable and well-traveled beer geek Stu Stuart of Belgium Beer Me! Tours.

We gathered in Brugge (Bruges, for the French and English speakers), an amazingly well preserved and picturesque medieval city of just over 20,000 people in the city center, with seemingly a pub or good beer venue on every corner. The historic city is a UNESCO World Heritage site that was serendipitously protected from German bombing by its distant location (10 miles from the North Atlantic) and tiny, tank-unfriendly bridges.

Had we died and gone to beer heaven? Oh, yes ...

Brugge is a canal-based commercial city similar to Amsterdam and Stockholm. It is often referred to as “the Venice of the North.” But Brugge is also a formidable beer destination, with several breweries and a gaggle of classic “cafés” all featuring extensive beer lists worthy of perusing at your leisure (preferably over a beer).

Our group of beer seekers gathered along one of the many canals in the charming courtyard of the Hotel Bourgoensch Hof for the hike to our tour bus, which would take us to our first brewery: the Saint Sixtus Abbey, home of Trappist **Westvleteren**, considered by many to be the producer of one of the greatest beers in the world, Westvleteren 12. Talk about starting at the top.

The brewery itself is not open to the public, but its tasting room and restaurant called In de Vrede, or “In the Peace,” proved to be a charmingly idyllic venue for beer appreciation. Situated in the rural farmlands of West Flanders, the abbey restaurant had a large outdoor patio with lots of tables for the exclusive use of our group. We were greeted with a picnic table laden with 28 glasses of Westvleteren beers. Welcome to Belgium.

I’m sure a twenty-something hipster marketing monk could send Westvleteren sales through the roof, but the good brothers are content with making the amount of beer they do and then cutting off sales when the beer is gone. There’s a concept. Cars line up in the morning and can buy up to two cases of beer a day until the beer stock is depleted.

The abbey frowns on people buying the scarce beer and reselling it, especially on the Internet, and is now much more proactive in policing abuse of this reasonable policy. There were no worries on that account with our group. We were buyers and keepers. Okay, and drinkers too.

All of our meals were preordered and were served upon arrival along with all three of the beers made at the abbey. The Blonde (green cap) was a yeasty pale ale coming in at 5.8%

See Beer Tour on page 8

Photo by Tom Dalldorf



City center of Bruges seen from Brouwerij De Halve Maan.

Photo submitted by brewery



Dinner at Brouwerij De Kroon in Leuven, Belgium.



Photo by Tom Dailhoff

De Halve Maan is part modern brewery, part brewing museum.

Beer Tour from page 7

abv. The Westvleteren 8 (blue cap) was dark, rich and robustly malty and, at 8% abv, was a favorite to accompany our lunch. The Westy 12 (pardon the familiarity), at 10.2% abv, was amazingly rich and delicious, as one would expect from a beer considered by many to be the best beer in the world. Stu, ever watchful, made sure the beers just kept coming, much to the delight of our group. Before long, a rustic wagon-trailer clattered by, pulled by three white Belgian draft horses. Stu thinks of everything.

We returned to Brugge, sated and satisfied that we had gotten our fill of the

magnificent Westy beers — something few beer geeks can say or even contemplate.

After a free afternoon of exploring beer in Brugge, we met at the hotel restaurant for dinner (again, preordered) with a fabulous collection of beers to choose from to accompany the delightful cuisine. Although the beers just kept coming, many in the group took off after dinner to explore the city at night, paying visits to classic Belgian beer cafés like 't Brugs Beertje and many others. Had we died and gone to beer heaven? Oh, yes ...

Day two did not require a tour bus. We took a walking tour of Brugge, stopping at the delightful **De Halve Maan** (The Half Moon) brewery and museum for a tour and tasting.

None of Belgium is what we Westerners would call "handicap-accessible," but the De Halve Maan facility, established in the 16th century but modernized when the Maes family took it over in 1856, provided a real challenge for some of us. There were more than 200 stairs to climb, some of which were steeply pitched, with very low doorways adding to the degree of difficulty. The reward was getting to the top floors, going out onto the roof and overlooking the city of Brugge. Breathtaking. While taking in the 360-degree view, the tallest buildings one could see were, of course, the church steeples.

Much of the old brewery has been turned into a delightful museum, but the brewhouse is a distinctly modern, highly functional stainless steel beauty. The beers produced are amazing, including the Straffe Hendrik golden tripel, with serious hop character, and the dark brown quadrupel, richly deep and complex. Outstanding among them, however, was the limited Heritage Wild beer served to us on arrival in the dining room. This beer is available only once a year. We win. A buffet lunch was provided, and Stu made sure the beers just kept coming. We were getting spoiled.

The afternoon was spent exploring and taking rides on the canal boats for hire. There is no better way to see the city than from a boat on one of the myriad canals.

Day three found us on another bus heading for the historic university city of Ghent, which produced some inspired but unprintable limericks, among other things. Along the way we visited **Brewery Contreras**, a small, family-owned farmhouse brewery established in 1818. The father still lives across the road, and his daughter and her husband now operate the brewery. The Valeir tripel was a big hit with our group, but the charming family operation was the bigger hit, resulting in lots of purchases of beer and what passes for brewery swag in such an artisanal setting.

Our visit to Ghent offered cathedrals both spiritual and temporal, the latter filled with wonderful beer, naturally. Lunching in a centuries-old pub and restaurant alongside a canal was most memorable.

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