



FLANDERS IN THE SLOW LANE

This Belgian Bike Tour Gets You From Pint A to Pint B

By Dan Rabin

I'm on a bicycle and my thoughts are adrift as they tend to be when the pedaling is effortless, the landscape serene and motor vehicles few. I'm contemplating my most difficult decision of the day, namely, what assortment of lovely Belgian ales will I indulge in at ride's end a few hours from now?

From behind me, the voice of Betty Van de Bunt, one of my nine riding and drinking companions, brings me back to the moment. Her Dutch accent punctuates the warning of a car approaching from behind us.

"Car en day beck," she calls out.

With well-practiced efficiency, we guide our bikes to the right edge of the road and fall into a single line. Moments later, a car rolls slowly past. The narrow road is actually more of a paved path than a roadway. To get around us, the driver steers onto the grassy strip that separates the pavement from a field of corn.

The car is soon out of sight, leaving us as the sole travelers on this section of the fietsroute, the extensive network of bicycle friendly travel lanes that dissect the landscape of Northern Belgium. After this short interruption, we fall back into a loose pack, resuming conversations or simply taking in the bucolic surroundings that unfold mile by carefree mile. Variations of this scene repeat themselves from time to time as we pedal the quiet Flemish back roads on our mission of biking and beer.

We're on a guided beer-themed bicycle tour of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern province of Belgium. We have visits planned at numerous breweries plus cozy beer bars and

cafes. While most travelers hop from one beer stop to the next in the insulated confines of a train or motor vehicle, our two-wheeled mode of travel immerses us in the sights, sounds and smells of Flanders that few travelers are able to experience.

The ten-day, 200-mile trek is led by Beercycling, a small tour company launched in 2011 by Evan Cohan, a Portland, Oregon-based beer and cycling enthusiast. After completing self-guided bike trips through Flanders and the northeastern U.S. in recent years, Cohan decided to take it to the next level by offering guided cycling tours with an emphasis on beer.

Though he was unsure if anyone would actually pay good money to fulfill his vision, Cohan planned two Beercycling tours of Belgium for the summer of 2011. With the catchy slogan, "Getting you from Pint A to Pint B," he attracted an audience of beer-loving adventurers who, like me, were seeking a more active touring and tasting experience. With assistance from the Tourist Office for Flanders and Brussels, I signed on for Beercycling's second tour.

On a Sunday morning in late August, we gather in Brussels. There are ten of us including Evan, seven guys and three women. We have a second guide, Henk Wesselink, an experienced cyclist, knowledgeable beer guy and small-scale hop grower from the Netherlands. Henk is accompanied by his girlfriend, Betty. They're a good-natured, affable couple and I enjoy their company immensely (especially when we need menus translated from Dutch).

The rest of us have arrived from our homes in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Ohio, North Carolina and Colorado. We range in



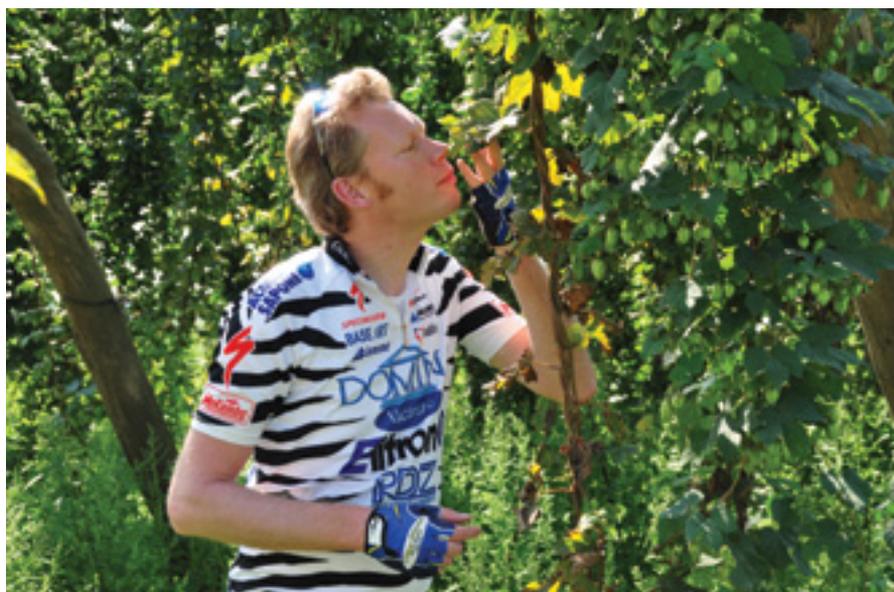
age from 28 to 63. With our shared appreciation of good beer, I feel like I'm among friends from day one.

We spend the first day seeing the sights of Belgium's bustling, cosmopolitan capital including the famous Manneken Pis (translation: Little Man Pee). The two-foot-tall bronze statue of a little naked boy peeing is Belgium's best-known piece of public art. It's great fun watching people from around the world – friends, families, couples, grandparents – have their picture taken in front of the little urinator.

Unlike tourists of lesser focus, Beercyclists don't thrive on sightseeing for long without hydration. For our first beer stop, Evan leads us down an obscure passageway to a hidden gem of a café named **À La Bécasse**. Dating from 1877, the café's dark wood interior and long wooden tables create a well-worn, timeless atmosphere oozing with character. It's also one of the few places that serve lambic in the traditional manner in stoneware pitchers. I order the Palette, a four-glass lambic sampler including Lambic Blanc (tart and the best of the four), Lambic Doux (sweet), Bourgogne des Flanders (brown) and Kriek (cherry). One could easily spend the rest of the day here working through the awesome bottle list, but there are other destinations on our agenda.

On the way to our next stop, the **Delirium Café**, we pass another whiz kid Janneke Pis, the female equivalent of the Manneken Pis.

With a menu of 2,000 beers, it's not surprising that the Delirium has garnered the attention of beer lovers world-wide. It's not a local's place, rather a gathering spot for young, hard-partying foreign travelers, especially Brits and Americans. We stay for one beer and move on. An afternoon on Brussels' tourist trail has been entertaining, but I'm anxious to get on a bicycle.



Henk inspects the hop crop in a field near Poperinge in West Flanders.

Our first day of biking is as close to a typical travel day as any, although every day of the tour is unique. After breakfast, we mount our panniers onto the bikes, known as *fiets* in Dutch, and roll out. After a few miles of easy cruising on a wide sidewalk along a leafy parkway, we turn onto a quiet residential street where a signpost indicates that we're at a node of the fietsroute, where two bikeways intersect. Every segment of the fietsroute has a number, so maps are not really necessary. On each of the six biking days of the tour, our guides provide us with a list of numbers specifying the segments of the fietsroute we'll travel on that day.

The diverse nature of the fietsroute reveals itself with each new segment. Painted bike lanes and low-volume residential streets are the norm in populated areas. In rural areas, where the majority of our biking takes place, lightly-traveled paved pathways are common. Motor vehicles are permitted on some of these paths, though they appear infrequently. Our route occasionally includes short segments of dirt singletrack, which I find great fun though a bit dicey on our upright commuter-style bikes. The Flemish countryside is virtually flat, making for easy pedaling over long distances.

As we make our way north, away from the Belgian capital, the landscape becomes more rural. We roll past corn fields and cow pastures, through tidy villages and past small farms with grazing sheep and goats. It's a landscape that becomes familiar in our travels, but never boring.

We tour a brewery nearly every day. Our first stop is at **Duvel Moortgart**, the largest brewery we'll visit. After touring the sprawling campus and modern brewhouse we linger in the tasting room, enjoying what our guide calls a "product confrontation" involving the world-class Duvel, the classic bottle-conditioned strong blonde ale.

That evening, in Antwerp, we meet for dinner then finish the evening drinking rare well-aged ales in the equally well-aged **Kulminator** beer bar. Though we're not obliged to stay together once we finish our daily rides, we generally peruse our destinations as a group. Some evenings, the



The author enjoys a "product confrontation" at Duvel.



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: The water route is an option in Bruges; Van Steenberge's Versele pours an aged Gulden Draak; The Belfry of Bruges, a landmark since the 13th Century; Brussels' famous Manneken Pis; Gruut's Annick De Splenter chats with Beercycling visitors in Ghent; A Westvleteren Trappist ale brings a big smile from Betty.

TOP LEFT AND TWO BOTTOM RIGHT PHOTOS BY DAN RABIN
TOP RIGHT AND TWO BOTTOM LEFT PHOTOS COURTESY OF BEERCYCLING

younger contingent conduct additional “product confrontations” after us 40-and-overs have retired. On many nights, my roommate returns to our hotel room before me to practice snoring.

Our second day of biking includes a visit to the **Van Steenberge Brewery**, my favorite of the tour. We arrive near the end of a 45-mile ride, our longest day on the bikes. The family-operated business, which began in 1784, produces a variety of well-known brands including Augustijn, Gulden Draak, Piraat and others.

We’re afforded VIP status from the moment we arrive. Pietr, our personable tour guide, starts us off with an Augustijn Blond which is wonderfully refreshing and restorative following a long day of pedaling. Pietr, it turns out, is the brother-in-law of brewery owner Jef Versele. “If I divorce my wife,” Versele later tell us jokingly, “I lose a good guy.”

We tour the brewery, then return to the tasting room for what turns into an extended and animated sampling session headed by the brewery’s accommodating owner. After finishing off generous pours of a variety of strong ales, Versele suggests we compare the fresh beers we’ve been drinking to those that have been aged. He digs into a stash of older bottlings of Gulden Draak and distributes the heady ten percent elixir among his already well-fortified guests. Hours after our arrival, we depart in high spirits. Fortunately, it’s a short ride to our hotel.

After several days of pedaling past cornfields and cow pastures, we have a welcome day off in Bruges. The medieval city is impossibly cute with its old buildings, narrow cobbled

streets and seductive waterways. The locals get around the compact city by bike, which makes me feel at home. We waste no time hitting the beer trail.



On the fietsroute, cyclists are immersed in the Flemish landscape.

We walk through the handsome public square, past the dueling frites stands (reportedly in competition since 1896), and down an inconspicuous alleyway – it’s great to have knowledgeable guides – to a cozy little pub named **De Garre**. We order a round of the house beer, an 11 percent Tripel brewed by **Van Steenberge**. It’s a great beer, dangerously drinkable for its strength, and a nice pairing with the cheese that arrives with it.

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Dinner that evening is at **Cambrinus**, which resides in a building dating from 1699. In addition to a menu of over 500 beers, the food menu includes regional dishes such as beef stew and rabbit with prunes, both cooked in beer. It's been a while since I've had a good hop fix, so I start with a XX Bitter, a Belgian IPA from the **De Ranke Brewery**. After sampling malt-forward ales the past week, the beer's hoppy punch makes my taste buds jump up at attention. It's evident that hoppy beers are on the upswing in Belgium, as indigenous IPAs such as Hopus, Poperings Hommel, Urthel Hop-it, Houblon Chouffe, Gouden Carolus Hopsinjoor and Viven IPA, appear with some regularity at our various beer stops.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEERCYCLING

Beercyclists end a day in Bruges at 't Poatersgat - "The Monks Hole."

After dinner, we stroll around the corner to 't Poatersgat - "The Monk's Hole" in the local Flemish dialect - a cellar beer bar with a ton of character. It's a dimly lit, cavernous space with brick pillars and marbled floor tiles. Green hop vines adorn the ceiling. There's a lively buzz of conversation from a young local crowd. The beer selection is great, of course. I finish the night with an Oerbier, a dark and slightly sweet offering from the De Dolle Brewery located not far from Bruges.

The next day, we make our way to **De Halve Maan** (The Half Moon), the city's only operating brewery which also houses a brewing museum. Bruges is an enormously popular destination for day tripping tourists, and the brewery offers guided tours throughout the day in several languages. With hordes of tourists swarming about, the scene is a bit Disneyesque. The tour is most notable for the retired brewing equipment on display and includes a glass of the brewery's unfiltered Brugse Zot Blond ale.

The last stop on our crowded Bruges beer agenda is '**t Brugs Beertje**, perhaps the city's best-known beer bar. Like so many of our destinations, the atmosphere is inviting, and the bottle list remarkable. I order a Rodenbach Grand Cru. It's a beer I've enjoyed on several occasions in the past, but today the tart, fruity, Flanders Red Ale strikes me as sublime, with complex layers of palate-teasing deliciousness.

It was at 't Brugs Beertje, in 1988, that a homebrewer from Colorado - who, coincidentally, was biking through Belgium on a beer quest - had an epiphany while sampling ales with the owner. He envisioned giving up his job as an electrical engineer

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It's never difficult to find a beer or a bike in Bruges, although finding your own bike can be a challenge!

and opening a brewery back home. In 1991, Jeff Lebesch and Kim Jordan, founded the New Belgium Brewing Company in Fort Collins, Colorado, now the third largest craft brewery in the U.S.

Excitement builds a few days later as we approach the **Westvleteren Brewery at the Abbey of Saint Sixtus**, whose beers are consistently rated among the finest in the world. Our ride through the farmlands takes us past the largest fields of Brussels sprouts I'm sure I'll ever see. Somehow, it seems appropriate.

No brewery tours are offered, as the abbey is off-limits to the public. A tall brick wall separates the compound from the street, leaving the interior a mystery to outsiders. Scores of visitors wanting to sample the legendary Trappist ales congregate en masse at the café across the street, where the beers are served. The café is a modern structure, which takes me a bit by surprise as we roll into the parking lot in late morning, just ahead of an onslaught of thirsty beer pilgrims.

We order several bottles of each of the three beers: the Blond Ale, the 8 and the 12. They arrive at our table in unlabeled brown bottles, identifiable only by their caps. At 5.8 percent alcohol, the blond ale is very drinkable with a surprisingly dry hoppy finish. I could easily knock back a few of these on this warm summer day.

The stronger 8 is totally different. The dark-hued ale has a touch of sweetness up front and a dry alcoholic finish. It's a great beer, one to be sipped and savored. The 12 has been rated the world's best-tasting beer numerous times on several websites. It's an outstanding creation by any measure, slightly vinous with intertwining notes of fruit, spice and cocoa leading to a long tummy-warming finish.

Our last few days are spent in Ghent, another Belgian beauty

dripping with history. In the center of the city is an imposing castle dating from 1180. According to local lore, the castle was the site of a conflict that was little-known beyond the nearby environs. Through the centuries, the heavily-fortified stronghold remained free of hostile confrontation. But in 1949, a group of college students stormed the castle in protest over the rising cost of beer. They held authorities at bay with rotten eggs and tomatoes, but were finally expelled from the premises when firefighters turned their hoses on them.

Ghent is also the home of the **Gruut Brewery**, a contemporary and very hip brewpub opened in 2009. With one exception, the beers are made without hops. Instead, they're brewed with a blend of spices, called *gruut*. It produces bitterness and balance and was commonly used before hops were introduced centuries ago. We meet the charming owner-brewer, Annick De Splenter, one of Belgium's few female brewmasters. I sample the citrusy blond ale which is not only quaffable, but intriguing, as the components of her secret spice blend are difficult to discern.

The next day, we return to Brussels, but not before filling our panniers with souvenirs from a well-stocked bottle shop. The tour ends, sadly but fittingly, sipping sour beers in the tasting room of the cobwebbed Cantillon Brewery, Brussels' last remaining producer of spontaneously-fermented ales.

It's been a great beer-filled biking adventure – or is it a bike-filled beering adventure? – one I would repeat in a heartbeat, all the way from Pint A to Pint B.

For information about Beercycling tours, go to www.beercycling.com.
To learn more about travel in Flanders, go to www.visitflanders.us.