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Belgium

A Sensual Journey!

One fine morning my manager at office invited me for a meeting and asked me if I liked to travel. Excited, I said yes, in a heartbeat! On a second thought though, this will be the first time I'd be living away from my family in an unknown country. Yet, the excitement was prevailing the anxiety and a month later I prepared to leave everybody I knew behind for a long time.

The destination was Belgium – the cockpit of Europe! When the day arrived, with lot of enthusiasm, I boarded the flight to Paris and after an hour journey in a high speed train I reached the final destination - Brussels! There are direct flights but this was a more romantic route. The sun was shining, the air was fresh and everything seemed just right until the moment when the driver gave a scare by asking me to be careful in this area. To add to the unease, being the business district, the roads were totally deserted on weekends – not a single soul in sight.

This is how my journey began in Belgium, landing at the deserted “Rue du Progrès” and taking a walk at the contrasting “Rue Neuve”, crowded with all kinds of people, surrounding by a mix of traditional and modern buildings and of course my friends.

The best way to explore Brussels is either in the red bus called “Hop On, Hop Off” or by walk. I explored most of the Brussels on foot and occasionally on metro.

Starting with “Rue Neuve” or New Street, which is one of the busier shopping streets in the center of Brussels, was bursting with young crowd due to close proximity to the colleges and universities. A visit to this street on any day can light up a boring evening. This being center of the city attracting many tourists, the streets were lined with all kinds of shops - from big brands selling luxury items to small shops selling handmade items like embroidered linen, purse or handbag.



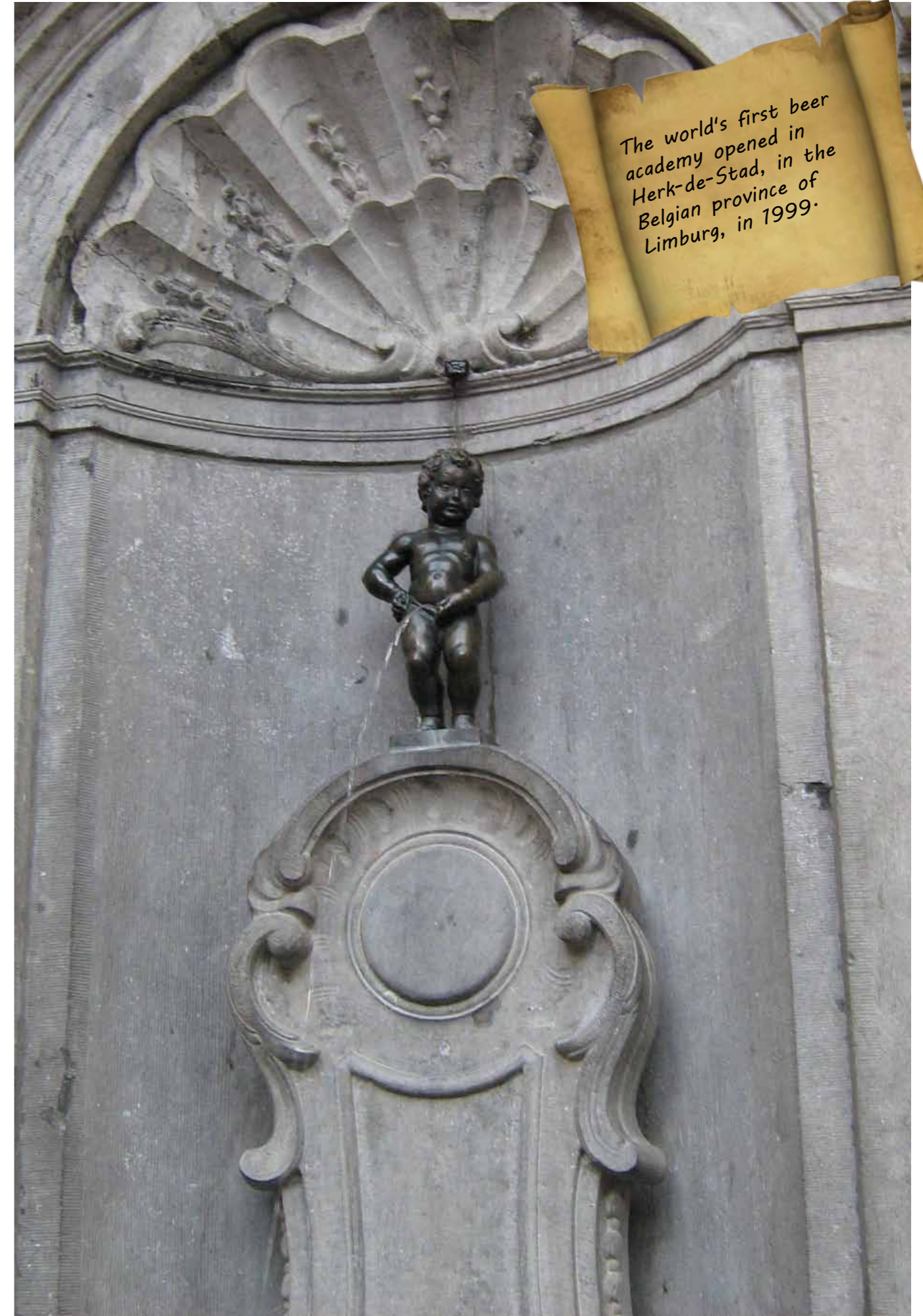
Very first newspaper was first printed and published in Antwerp, Belgium.

The most popular attraction at the center of the city is Grand Place, which is the city's Central Square. The square was surrounded by medieval buildings, containing City's Town Hall and Museum of the City of Brussels. The buildings were oozing luxury and character with several buildings adorning golden engraving. We took a bag of frites with mayonnaise, sat among the crowd in the middle of the square and gazed at them long enough for the night to fall and to notice the imperfection of the main Town Hall building. Apparently legend has it that the architect committed suicide after realizing that the building's entry arch doesn't quite line up with the tower. Grand Place at night was indeed magical. Belgium is famous for Frites or French fries which actually originated in Belgium and is not France as the name suggests.

Note: The square was venue to several yearly events like flower carpet (once in two years), jazz festival, fireworks etc.

The next day, as it was a Sunday, we went to the city center again to visit another famous landmark. A few minutes from Grand Place, I was taken to a statue of a small boy peeing into a fountain. The place was jam-packed with people and we had to wait for several minutes for our turn, to click a photo. Manneken Pis is a very popular tourist attract. But, I didn't quite understand the appeal of a tiny boy peeing into a small fountain at first. But the more time, I spent in Brussels and the more legends I heard, the more I realized what the boy symbolizes. It captures the calmness and spirit of resistance of the people of Brussels.

One of the legends on this statue goes like this - a little boy named Julianske, happened to be spying on the enemies - who were preparing to attack the city. Sensing the threat, he urinated on the burning fuse which eventually saved the entire city.



The world's first beer academy opened in Herk-de-Stad, in the Belgian province of Limburg, in 1999.



Without missing, we did try out Belgium Waffles near Manneken Pis. There was variety of topping to choose, from simple chocolate sauce to more exuberant whipped cream with strawberries. Life is like a box of chocolates. I'm sure we all have heard these words, but to understand the meaning of these, I'd to travel a thousand miles to Belgium, literally! Belgium produces the best chocolates in the world, ranging from a simple plain chocolates bars like Dairy Milk to a more assorted surprises which "you will never know what you're gonna get". The world's biggest chocolate selling point is Brussels National Airport.

Next we headed towards Royal Palace of Brussels which is located just a few minutes' away.

This is the official palace of the King and Queen of the Belgium. The palace faces Brussels Park which is the largest of its kind in Brussels. We took a walk like the kings prior, around the park, glancing at the numerous beautiful sculptures and fountains.



Brussels Summer Festival - This one-of-a-kind festival takes over the city, which has a great time in all kinds of ways and at great prices. When Manneken-Pis picks up his guitar, everyone starts rocking'n'rolling in Brussels during the BSF! It takes place in a giant stage beneath the windows of the Royal Palace and another at Mont des Arts as well as more than 30 indoor concerts and after-parties.

The next week, the first weekend trip we took in Brussels was to Atomium. This place is at the other end of the city in Laeken, but

not very far – again a few minutes in metro. Atomium is a modern wonder with nine huge spheres connected to form a shape of an iron crystal atom – hence, the name Atomium. The top sphere provides a good panoramic view of Brussels.

More interestingly, located at the foot of the Atomium was Mini Europe. This is the famous miniature park with reproductions of popular monuments of Europe, from Eiffel tower to the leaning tower of Pisa. We spent the entire day clicking pictures of every monument on display and of course admiring the detailing that has gone into making each of them. Sadly, I heard this place is closed now!

By now you know that Belgium is known for Waffles, Frites and Chocolates. But felt grown up for these. And for our luck, no other country in the world produces more number of beers than Belgium. There are over 800 kinds of beers made in Belgium. Reports say that Belgians consume in average 150 liters of beer per person per year.

There are several assortments of beers available but the king of all is the Trappist variety. Few of my colleagues had visited a monastery and brought back Westvleteren XII, a rare Trappist beer. With the World's best beer in hand, rest of the evening was spent in its name. With 10.2% alcohol, the beer was pretty strong but at the same time, quite flavorful. The rich aroma and smooth taste with a hint of caramel/vanilla, was one of the better tasting beers I've ever had. The weekends continued with other beers. Rochefort 10 - at 11.3%, by



Belgium produces the greatest variety of bricks in the world.



far is the strongest of all Trappist. Achel & LaTrappe tripel, relatively mild - 8% alcohol content. They all taste different but somehow feel related.

If you were wondering what the link between monasteries and beer is – the Trappist beers are brewed by monks for their livelihood in their monasteries in Belgium and Netherlands.

The next beer, Westmalle tripel, in contrary, at 9.5% alcohol content is very strong. A glass or two of this will definitely knock you down. The final Trappist beer which defines dark beer for me - the Chimay Bleu. It is also a strong beer with 9% alcohol but has a great blend of rich dry fruit and brown sugar taste. This is the beer that helped me acquire taste for dark beer.

As I explored places, I treated myself with more tastes like Flemish Meat Stew, Mussels etc. With so many diverse experiences to offer, I'm happy that I got an opportunity to spend some years of my life in Belgium. There may be more romantic and better known places in Europe, but for me there's something about Belgium that still excites me. And if given an opportunity again, I will accept it yet again!

Express Info

Currency
1 EURO = 70.1701 INR

Best Time to travel
June to September

Getting THERE
Brussels Airport (Brussel - Zaventem) is an International airport of Brussels, the capital of Belgium.
There are direct flights to Brussels from New Delhi and Mumbai. The fare starts from INR 52000 (round trip)
From Brussels Airport, you can either take a taxi which costs around 50-60 euros or train for around 10 euros or bus for 4 euros to the city.

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