



Bruges

"The Venice of the North"

After three weeks in Brussels I thought I'd seen it all: the magnificence of the monuments and the grandeur of architecture that Europeans prize themselves on. It wasn't difficult to adjust to the sinful Belgian lifestyle of chocolate flowing freely from every shop on the corner of every street and beer, not assumed to be Red Stripe but any one of a hundred brands. I was in a place where asking for ketchup in a restaurant was an unforgivable act, but a glass of wine at breakfast was a way of life. My trip was coming close to an end; but time hadn't allowed me to see much outside of the capital city. Doing so was a last-minute decision which changed the outcome of my entire trip.

I was in awe from the very moment I exited the train station. Instead of German-made automobiles scurrying about on the streets, scores of bicycles were parked neatly outside of the station, whilst dozens were in motion. It was as if I had walked into a bicycle convention. Bicycles are apparently a very popular mode of transportation for the young and young at heart. As I went deeper into the city, walking across acres of well-manicured, storybook-green lawns, my fascination grew. Nothing had prepared me for the beauty of this medieval city, Bruges.

Bruges is the capital of the West Flanders province in the North-Western region of Belgium and is predominantly Dutch. It's known to many in Europe and across the world as the "Venice of the North" because it bears many similarities to that Italian city. Picturesque bridges and canals

city centre contribute to its aesthetic and romantic appeal. Beautiful white swans glided gracefully atop the canal as couples merrily went by in boats. On the narrow grey brick streets, cars yielded and made way for horse-drawn carriages. Wide-eyed tourists were busy taking snapshots.

Enchanting tearooms and sidewalk cafes where one could feast on freshly made Belgian waffles are common fixtures in Bruges, but not as common as delectable hand-made pralines displayed in the windows of local chocolatiers. In Bruges, chocolate is more than a sweet treat; it's a culture, and I was happy to embrace it without guilt.

I wandered about the city for hours. Grand castle-like cathedrals and museums stood proudly in the city centre. Whether it was a house or shops bearing intricately designed Belgian lace, each building seemed to have a story to tell. Bright floral arrangements and flags adorned the window sills of red and brown brick buildings with orange roofs. Bruges' unrivalled beauty, deeply rooted in its



By Janeen Johnson