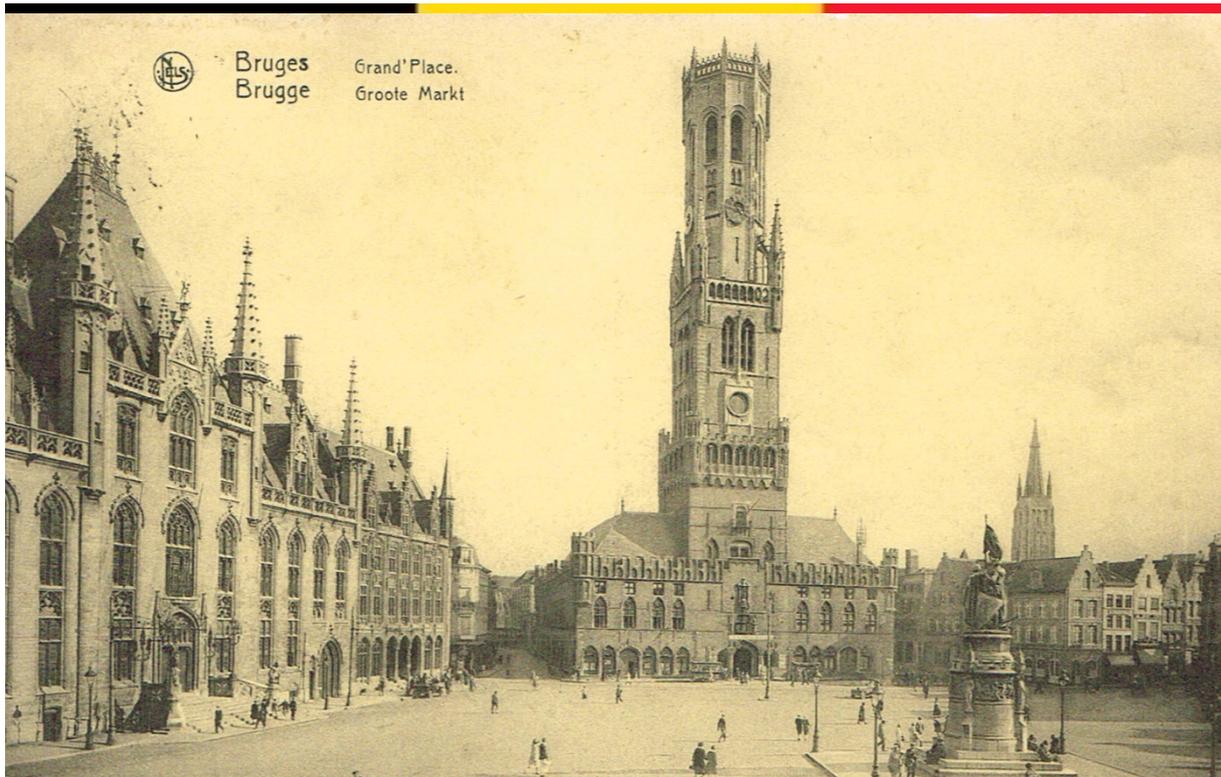


## 2. Bruges and the Westhoek



Apparently you can't visit Belgium without visiting Bruges. I admit it's a beautiful city – an open air museum, if you like – where you can spend a lazy leisure day, but bear in mind it will be an expensive one. Bruges is a tourist magnet if there ever was one. However, it lacks the vivid student, city and night life you can find in Ghent, Amsterdam, or even Brussels. This is a picture post card city.

That's why I've combined this beautiful city with the farmland of the Westhoek, the scene of some of the most cruel battles of World War I. The Westhoek ("West Corner") still lives and breathes the war – those four years when the battlefield was stuck in the mud around Ieper and Diksmuide have left traces that will never be erased. Although there are quite a lot of tourists in the Westhoek too, it's different there. More restraint, if you like. I will show you some places that are dead quiet too, in order to catch the right mood.

If you want to make it a two-day trip, you can do everything I suggest here, preferably in this order: spend a leisurely day in Bruges and Damme and visit the Westhoek and West-Vleteren on the second day. In the touristic season, you can take a boat from Bruges to Damme and back – something I would recommend if you want to take it easy.

If you want to make it a one day trip, do the city walk in Bruges before noon. Skip Damme. If you have a car at your disposal, you can choose between West-Vleteren or the Diksmuide car tour – both would be too much. Then, head for Ieper – I strongly recommend the "before Ieper" part before visiting the city.

If you don't have a car, you should take a train from Bruges to Ieper. Maybe you can still catch a battlefield tour with a private company or do a somewhat more extensive city walk or enjoy the terraces of the cafés in summer.

## By public transport

Bruges is well-served by trains from Brussels, Oostende or Ghent.

Ieper and Diksmuide can be reached by train but it will take a long time (about 2 hours from Ghent or even Oostende). Unless you really have time to spare and figure out train or bus routes, I suggest limiting the Westhoek part to Ieper city.

You can get to Ieper from Bruges by train if you want to make it a one-day-trip: first take the train to Kortrijk and transfer to the train to Poperinge in Kortrijk station. This will take a little under 2 hours. The train ticket (single journey) costs about 12€.

If you are really set on getting to the West-Vleteren abbey by bus, it's a bit complicated. You have to get to Poperinge by train and call the number 059/56 52 56 to arrange for a bus. This bus only comes when you've made the call, at least two hours in advance. The price is the same as for any bus ride but these buses only ride when they are called upon.

Anyhow, if you want to go by public transport, make sure you check the time tables and lines and correspondences in advance.

## Bruges

Bruges is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. The real origins of the city aren't very clear yet, but it's believed that a fortification existed as long ago as 650, and that Bruges already had city rights in 1127 – the year when count Charles The Good was killed in the St-Donatschurch.



The Bruges Belfry

Bruges became wealthy as a cloth manufacturing and trades city. Actually, the Dutch word for stock exchange ("beurs") is believed to originate in Bruges, where the Van der Burse family united traders in their house. This house is still there.

One of the most famous years in its history is 1302. Although the actual history is not always very clear and the popular account has proven flaws in it, it's a history that's part of the Flemish identity.

By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Bruges was the capital of Flanders and an economical power. Although Flanders was officially under French reign, it took a lot of liberty. When France was at war with England (from 1292 on), Flanders made a pact with England and count Guy of Dampierre's daughter's hand was promised to the later king Edward II of England.

The count was imprisoned by the French and an armistice was signed because it was clear that the Flemish army – that couldn't count on the English despite a previous pact – was much too weak to withstand the French.

When asked by the people of Ghent, the French king Philip the Fair (or Philip IV) lowered taxes for Flanders and he was enthusiastically greeted when he visited the city. The "poorters" (the elite) of Bruges, however, were too proud to ask for lower

taxes and it was forbidden to the normal people to plea for lower taxes, so the king was greeted very coldly by the people of Bruges. The animosity between the poorters and the people of Bruges came to a new high when the poorters wanted the city to pay for the expensive and exquisite clothing they had worn during the royal visit. Pieter de Coninck, a weaver, led an uproar and was imprisoned in 1301 but freed by the people of Bruges. Rule of the city was taken over by the Leliaarts, who supported French rule.

De Coninck formed a gang of rebels along with butcher Jan Breydel and they took the castles of Sijsele and Male, killing a French garrison of 10 men. The French responded by marching on Bruges with 800 heavily armed men, and again De Coninck was banished from the city. The people of Bruges helped de Coninck enter the city, and on Good Friday, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1302 the Brugse Metten took place. In the early morning, a group of rebels – maybe led by de Coninck and Jan Breydel, although this is doubtful – set out to kill every Leliaard and every French soldier, surprising them in their sleep. According to the legend, they asked everybody to say “Schilt ende vriend” (“shield and friend”, difficult to pronounce for the French) – although another school of thought is that the phrase was actually “s gilden vriend” (“friend of the guilds”).

This massacre led directly to the Battle of the Gold Spurs, near Kortrijk, where the heavily armed and rich French army of knights was defeated by the Flemish guilds and peasants who were far less equipped.

This battle was later the subject of the famous novel ‘De Leeuw van Vlaanderen’ (‘The Lion of Flanders’) by Flemish writer Hendrik Conscience. This book, from 1838, was immensely popular and it led to more Flemish national consciousness – although it’s far from historically accurate.

Later, Bruges is at its cultural high point as the city of several Flemish Primitives, among whom Jan Van Eyck and Hans Memling.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> century on the wealth of Bruges diminished along with its position as trades

city. The Burgundy royalty had its residence in Bruges since the 14<sup>th</sup> century but after the death of Mary of Burgundy (1482) the royals moved their court elsewhere. Antwerp took its place as most important harbour and trades city. During and after the Spanish occupation (from 1592 on) Bruges became one of the poorest cities in Flanders, and it didn’t profit from the industrial revolution either.

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bruges became famous as an arts city and a touristic



A view of Bruges in a stained glass window

centre, under the influence of the novel Bruges-La-Morte by Georges Rodenbach (although this novel is now hardly ever read or known in Flanders) and the 1902 exposition of paintings by the Flemish Primitives.

Bruges didn’t suffer much during the two world wars and now it is one of the best preserved and most beautiful cities in Europe. Its city centre is protected by Unesco.

## A city walk in Bruges

### Famous Bruges

(FROM TRAIN STATION - to be added)

This walk is loosely based on a walk by the Bruges tourist office called “Monumental Bruges” – there’s no English translation available, so I’ve taken the liberty of making some small adjustments. This walk shows you the main monuments and places of Bruges.

Park your car near the Katelijnepoort – the street is called “Buiten Gentpoortvest” and there’s parking space next to the road on the waterside. If you prefer a guarded car park, park in the Katelijne parking (formerly “Begijnhof”) on the Katelijnestraat.

*Cross the bridge into the Katelijnestraat if you’ve parked on the Buiten Gentpoortvest (the parking is in the Katelijnestraat). Go right into the Nieuwe Gentweg where you’ll pass a couple of godshuizen. A godshuis (“God’s House”) was generally founded by wealthy benefactors as housing for widows or needy elderly. Most of the godshuizen consist of small white houses, sometimes around a small garden. Often, the door to the garden is open and you can go in to have a look, like in Godshuis De Muelenaere.*

*Turn left into the small Groeninge street. There are signs with jokes and puns in Dutch on the wall. This street brings you to the very idyllic Hof Arents, a little square with statues that depict the apocalypse, and a very picturesque little bridge on the left. Cross the bridge and go right around the Church of Our Lady. Almost immediately on the right is the Gruuthuse, now a museum, once the city palace of the lords of Gruuthuse.*

*Opposite the church is the St-Jan’s Hospital, a 13<sup>th</sup> century building with a museum with paintings by Hans Memlinc, one of the Flemish Primitives. Go in the Mariastraat on the left. Over the bridge, take the small Stoofstraat on the right. This street is named after the “stoves”, a sort of public bath houses where there was often prostitution as well. You arrive at the Walplein which you cross straight*

*through. On this square is the Brewery “De Halve Maan” that brews the very good Brugse Zot (“Fool of Bruges”) and Straffe Hendrik.*

*Go right into the Wijngaardstraat and to the Wijngaardplein. You can probably see the horses being fed here. Walk right to the white gate of the begijnhof. A “begijnhof” – beguinage in English – is where beguines lived, religious women who didn’t take official vows and who didn’t completely want to retreat from the world. You can enter the grounds and the church for free and for a small fee you can visit one house. It is of course asked that you respect the calm of the environment. The begijnhof is open from 6:30am-6:30pm, the beguine’s house can be visited from 10am-5pm on weekdays and 2:30pm-5pm on Sundays.*

*Take the exit past the church (or walk past the begijnhof to the left if it’s closed) and go into the Minnewaterpark. The grounds of this park were used for bleaching linen until the 1800s. The grounds were divided and sold to several owners and on one part a castle was built. In 1969, this was demolished apart from some smaller parts. The grounds were destined to become a residential area, but by the 1970s it was realised that a park would be more suitable. There’s a tower that used to be a powder magazine (“Poertoren”). You might also encounter the many swans in Bruges. There’s a legend about these: Maximilien of Austria lived in Bruges and he wanted to limit the power of the cities and raise heavy taxes. The civilians of Bruges locked him up and tortured and beheaded some of the noblemen that were loyal to him in front of his window. One of them was Pieter Lanchals (“Long neck”). Later, after Maximilian had been freed and was back in power, he ordered the city of Bruges to keep swans (with “long necks”) forever. This last bit is doubtful as the swans of Bruges are mentioned long before Pieter Lanchals was born.*

*At the powder tower, cross the bridge and turn left on the other side of the water. You arrive back at the Wijngaardplein with the horse*

*fountain. Go back to the Walplein (where the Brewery is) and go left there in the Zonnekemeers. Go right at the end (Oostmeers) and take the fourth street on the left (Sint-Jan in de Meers). Go right and immediately left to the Zand. On this square is the concert building.* This modern building by Flemish architects Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daems was constructed for the Bruges 2002 cultural capital of Europe. It rests on more than 4000 springs and the acoustics are among the best of the world. The building was inaugurated on 20.02.2002 at 20:02. The main tourist office is here as well.

The fountain on the square dates from the 1980s and depicts the cities of Antwerp, Ghent, Kortrijk and Bruges (four ladies); the seaman and the fish symbolise the connection with the sea. A third group represents the Flemish polders (the agricultural plains) and the cyclists are accompanied by Tjil Uylenspiegel and Nele, the heroes from a folk tale.

*Now off to the shopping streets, unfortunately. With your back to the Concertgebouw, go to the fountain and turn right. Take the Zuidzandstraat and follow it until you get to the Sint-Salvatorcathedral.* There was a church here as long ago as the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The main buildings date from the 1500s. This building wasn't built as a cathedral, that's why it's smaller than the nearby Church of Our Lady. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the cathedral was on the Burg which we will visit later. During the French Revolution it was demolished and the bishop was banished from Bruges. The St-Salvatorchurch was used as cathedral ever since the bishopric of Bruges was reinstated in 1834.

*Go right. You pass the cathedral's tower (you can visit the cathedral) and turn around the cathedral. On the rear of the cathedral, walk into the Sint-Salvatorskoorstraat and then straight on into the Oude Burg. Walk right into the Kartuizinnestraat. At the end of the Kartuizinnestraat go left and follow the Wollestraat until you arrive at the market square (Markt).* The main building here is the bell tower (belfort). It can be climbed to give a wonderful view of the city. (WERKEN tot??) Belforts were a symbol for the richness and independence of the wealthy cities. On the left in the belfort is a permanent Dali exposition with paintings by the famous Spanish painters.

*Left of the belfort, through the Breydelstraat, is the Burg.* Here you find the city hall of Bruges. This building was constructed in several phases. Inside is an interactive touch screen that shows you the phases in this construction. This is free. The most beautiful room of the city hall can be visited at a cost.

On this square you'll find the Basilica of the Holy Blood, just right from the city hall. It doesn't look very church-like but it consists of two chapels. A relic with the Holy Blood is kept here, and every year there's a very elaborate Holy Blood Procession. This procession takes place on Ascension Thursday and there are around 1400 people walking along. 30 to 50000 people come to see it.

*Next to the white and gold building, go into the Blinde Ezelsstraat.* This takes you to the fish market. From Monday to Friday fresh fish is sold here. *Cross the market and turn right to the Rozenhoedkaai.* At the intersection with the Pandreitje, you have a very well-known spot for taking photographs.

A bit further along the street are the Gruuthuse and Groeningemuseum.

## And off to Damme

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Damme is a charming little village with about five second hand book shops. That's a lot less than in the Walloon "book village" Redu, but the village in itself is also very beautiful. There's also a book market several times a year. Check out the calendar on <http://www.toerismedamme.be/evenementen/evBoekendorp.htm>. Most of the books are in Dutch, of course, but some of the shops have a foreign language section. You will also find many restaurants and bars in Damme. They are hardly cheaper than in Bruges.

Depending on how many book shops you want to visit, you'll spend at least one hour in Damme, but it's more likely you'll be there for two or three hours.

It seems that lately the "book" part of the city has become less important.



Damme, seen from the church tower

Damme has been a city since 1180, evolved from a fisherman's village on a creek from the sea. After a fire in 1213, a number of buildings were constructed, among which the church, the St-Jans hospital and market halls.

Because of silting, the creek became too shallow to navigate by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 1800s Napoleon ordered a canal to be dug, the Damse Vaart, also known as the Napoleon canal. This canal was to connect Bruges to the Scheldt river. Because of Napoleon's defeat, the canal was never finished, but an important part of Damme was torn down and had disappeared forever.

Later, perpendicular to the Damse Vaart, two parallel canals were dug. The Leopold canal from 1845 serves to drain the polders. It had to be dug because the drainage up to then had been through Sluis and Cadzand, in Holland. After the Belgian independence in 1830, the Dutch didn't want that water through their waterways and they closed the locks.

The Schipdonk canal from 1852 serves as a diversion canal for the excess water of the Leie river. It used to be filled with dirty water from the industry further on. That's why this canal is called "de stinker" ("the stinky one") and the Leopold canal is called "de blinker" ("the shiny one").

## Getting to Damme from Bruges

The Lamme Goedzak (the ‘Negligent, Kind Soul’ – named after a character from the Tjil Uylenspieghel legend), a river boat, goes to Damme and back from April to October. Times and prices can be found on this website: <http://www.toerismedamme.be/boot.htm>

A cheaper alternative – or the only one outside the tourist season – is the bus (line 43) from the Bruges market place (Markt) to Damme.

You can get there by car too, of course. There are free parking spaces just outside the city centre.

## From the centre of Bruges to the Lamme Goedzak dock

\*\*\* naar dok met bus & terugwandelen

## A city walk in Damme

Damme isn't big so there's no chance you will get lost, but I propose this walk so as not to miss out on anything.

There are two small parking lots just outside the city centre, where parking is free. I recommend the parking Damme-Oost at the Damse Vaart-Zuid. A little closer to the city is also where the Lamme Goedzak boat from Bruges arrives and departs so the walk is the same whether you come by car or boat.

*With your back to the Damse Vaart or Napoleon canal, walk left until you reach the bridge.* If you've come from the parking, soon on your right you'll see a small statue group on a low wall. This is a commemoration of Tjil Uilenspieghel ("mirror of owls" – knowing this, you'll see what the statue means. He was the hero from several medieval and later folk tales, and according to the popular 19<sup>th</sup> century novel by Charles de Coster he is born in Damme). On the other bank you can see the Schellemolen windmill from 1867. From April to September it can be visited. *Do not cross the bridge, go right in the Kerkstraat. Soon, you arrive at the square with the city hall from 1468.* Look closely at the city hall: on the right corner, two stones are hung about 2,5m high. These are the so-called "klappeistenen". There are two legends around these stones. The first one is that the building supervisor of the city hall calculated the number of stones so precisely that only two were left when the building was complete.

The other one is that these stones were to be worn around the neck by women who spoke bad about others, as punishment. This kind of woman was called a "klappei".

*Go in the Jacob Van Maerlantstraat – that's the street on the right hand side of the city hall. Go right in the Corneliestraat.* This brings you to the Haringmarkt, the former herring market. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, around 28 million herrings were traded here each year, mostly from Sweden.

*Turn back and take the Pottenbakkersstraat on the left. You're back in the Kerkstraat. Go left. You pass the doors of the St-Jans hospital.* There's a museum with old furniture, paintings, earthenware and such.

Walk further, to the church. This church was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century at the high point of Damme's wealth. In 1725, parts were demolished because the church had become too large for the shrinking number of people in Damme. The spire was also taken down because it had dilapidated. Under the tower is the gravestone of Jacob Van Maerlant. He was one of the most important medieval writers in the Netherlands. He died in Damme in 1291.

In summer, you can visit the tower. On top, you have a splendid view. You may be able to see the shape of the former fortifications (they're lined with trees). *Follow the small path that's perpendicular to the Kerkstraat. This leads to the Burgstraat. Follow this street – you pass a book shop in an old school building. At the end of the Burgstraat you're once again in the Kerkstraat. Take it to the left*

until you reach the bridge again. Here, you can choose to cross it and go left to visit the wind mill, or to go back to the parking or the Lamme Goedzak, or have a drink somewhere.

If you still have more than an hour left and you feel like a walk in the green pastures, cross the bridge and go right immediately after until you reach the dyke. Here, you see the Leopold and

Schipdonk canals I've mentioned in the introduction. Go left on the dyke and take the small path that leads down a couple of hundreds of meters further. Follow this path – it becomes asphalted and later cobbled – until you arrive at the Damsesteenweg. On the left, once again, you see the bridge over the canal, to your car or to the Lamme Goedzak.

