

In Search of the Great War





by Ben Horan
Photos by Tom Robertson

By Izegem I was getting pretty good. I'd managed to stake out a place in the beer line and had repeated the order in my head a dozen times, "Een bruin en een blonde, alstublieft." One brown and one blonde, please. It seemed like there was a 50/50 chance whether I would receive raised eyebrows and skepticism or just an answer in English after stumbling in Flemish.

But this time I was confident. I knew the words, I'd been practicing the accent, and I even had a pretty good idea of what to expect in the way of follow-up questions. I stepped forward to meet the apron-clad teen who appeared to be taking money, but before I could order, he addressed me in perfect, unaccented English. I stammered through the order in my native tongue, only to find on my defeated retreat to our table that the line actually formed a few meters from where I had ordered and that I had been standing with the servers behind the bar.

My friend Tom Robertson met me with a plateful of bratwursts — his responsibility in our division of labor — and I jokingly lamented that two weeks may be too little time to assimilate in Belgium after all. Of course, assimilating into a European country with a difficult language wasn't the objective of our trip, but it's always fun to try.

We'd come to Flanders, in western Belgium, on the 99th anniversary of the beginning of the first world war to see what sort of preparations this place would make for the centennial recogni-



many consonants in a row?" I wondered, and the confusion mounted as Lex explained that many cities were spelled differently in Flemish, French, and English. Ieper would be labeled on some maps as Ypres, and the first British soldiers in the region referred to the place as "Wipers." It quickly became clear that even though we had two weeks to ride around this small country, we couldn't possibly see everything.

Of course seeing everything had never been the plan, in fact Tom and I had arrived in Belgium without much in the way of a plan at all.

We had been made to understand that bicycle touring in Flanders was user-friendly and straightforward, although our first impression was the opposite. We had hoped to rent touring bikes once we arrived but found that rental options seemed geared toward either fancy race machines or clunky city cruisers. I'd heard a rumor that Europe more or less shuts down in late July and August, which turned out to be spot on, and we never got an email back from a single bike shop. Ultimately Tom brought his trusty touring setup while I reached for a cyclocross bike equipped



with an ultra-light mountain bike touring kit.

Over an evening with General Lex, a plan slowly began to take form. We would spend a couple of days around Roeselare, before venturing to the Ieper region to see about some new war museums. After that, we would head north toward the coast to Brugge and Ghent, before circling back around to Roeselare — through Antwerp if there was time. After the introduction we packed our bags and prepped for the road.

In spite of our early trepidation, the touring in Belgium turned out to be every bit as easy as you might expect

from a country so near to the Netherlands. Cycling is so part of the culture there that drivers are aware and polite, which is actually usually moot because Flanders is navigable by a web of scenic bike paths that connect every city and hamlet. Path intersections are each labeled numerically on wooden pylons as well as on paper maps that are readily available in tourist hubs for a few euros. It's also not very hilly. Fortified with confidence wrought from our newly purchased guides and hampered only by the jetlag-induced mandatory 7 p.m. bedtime, we set out from Roeselare to visit the fresh renovation of the Flan-

ders Fields Museum in nearby Ieper.

To herald our departure the sky was a low-hanging gray, and the sun manifested as a day-long glow rather than a discrete disc. We left Roeselare on winding, cobbled streets, and I was never quite sure which way was north. The city map was no help — the roads looked like a drunkard had mended a fishing net and laid it across the landscape. It was only by the grace of the unflappable buttons that we even made it out of town, and before long, we were winding through the Belgian countryside.

A friend told me over a glass of wine



before the trip that “Belgium is sort of like Iowa, but European.” Of course, he had never been to Belgium, but he is from Iowa and as far as I could tell the likeness was fair. Neatly partitioned acres of garlic fields are transected by muddy two-track access roads and low stone walls, and quaint farmhouses dot the horizon. The odd dairy farm lends a richness to the breeze that smells like plunging your fingers into the garden for the first time in spring. I think that Jefferson’s yeoman farmer would feel quite at home, and the place made me nostalgic for a way of life that I’ve never known.

And, despite the straightness of the fields, we found ourselves making a lot of turns. I live and do most of my riding in Montana where the roads are long, straight, and unadulterated. At home it’s not that big a deal to ride 80 or 100 miles at a time so it was not without some incredulity that I accepted Tom’s insistence that 40 to 50 kilometers of riding constituted a full day. Despite the ease with which we navigated what we had dubbed the “button” system of bike paths and labeled intersections, Tom’s experience proved to be spot on. The roads in Belgium are anything but long and straight. The paths are completely made up of small hills and tight corners. Every moment felt like I had broken away in the Rhonde van Vlaanderen, and it had been a long time since riding a road bike had felt so much like play. I distinctly remember saying “Wheee!” more than twice.

Intersection button led to intersection button, the kilometers ticked by, and after a couple of hours, we had slipped completely into a state of navigational complacency. This state came grinding to a halt when we found ourselves at an intersection that did not resemble what was presented on our map. We rode back a ways to see if we had missed a turn but kept finding ourselves returning to the same quagmire of roads.

Fortunately for us, riding bikes is very popular in Belgium. Throughout our fumbling we were passed by scores of locals and other tourists, most of whom seemed completely comfortable in spite of a situation that we had concluded was undecipherable. I had



been practicing my Flemish from a book and with Lex, and while I was still somewhat less than proficient in the tongue that Mark Twain once described as “not so much a language as a disease of the throat,” I couldn’t see any harm in giving it a try.

The first couple I approached was clad in spandex and those rear-view mirrors that clip to the helmet so I felt safe to explain to them that we were lost. I stammered through what I thought of as a description of our plight and to my delight was made to understand that this couple was also in

Belgium on holiday and also spoke no Flemish. They also spoke no English. German, French, and Italian were our only options. I don’t speak German, French, or Italian, but I did try Spanish with an Italian accent. This was both so useless and offensive that they threw up their hands and stormed off and we never saw them again.

Our next effort in decoding the map conundrum was much more successful — or at least much more friendly. As soon as the unhelpful German couple departed, a quartet of Belgian nationals on city bikes arrived wearing expres-