



by Ben Horan Photos by Tom Robertson

y 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-

tion. Yet a few days from our scheduled return home, we found ourselves in the gray-hued industrial city of Izegem, drinking beer, eating sausage, and cheering at a bike race. All the while we were keeping an eye out for Tour de France great Nico Mattan, who'd told us in a text message that if we found him here he'd buy us a beer.

I hadn't been sure what we would find when I got on a plane to cross the Atlantic — hopefully a story about a war. But we discovered that Belgium is much more than that, it's a country of texture and complexity not overwhelmed by a single theme. We came looking for a war story but found instead a culture shaped by war, colored by its history, and painted with a love for the bike.

In August and September of 1914, as the last tethers of peace in a globalized community frayed and split, German forces rolled through neutral Belgium in an effort to quickly quash the French military effort. The resistance proved to be more robust than anticipated, and the German progress was slow. The Industrial Revolution had brought new horrors to war, and throughout the western fields of Belgium's Flemish farmland, the opposing sides turned irrigation ditches into trenches and hillsides into bunkers. To shunt a flanking German maneuver, a small team of fast-thinking engineers and soldiers flooded the low-lying-Yser River floodplain, funneling the fighting to the small city of Ieper. The battle lines drawn in early 1915 would remain essentially unchanged for four years while millions of young men lost their

The Great War, as it is known there, is no small event in Belgium's history. The country is about the size of West Virginia and hosted the worst fighting of one of the deadliest periods in human history. Belgium was the birthplace of trench warfare and the first place in which poison gas was deployed. The war casts a shadow across every facet of daily life and has influenced every family tree, yet the Belgians we met were an entirely good humored, self-effacing group.

On our first night in the country and an hour's drive from the airport in Brussels, we found ourselves in a warm and immediately familiar bed and breakfast in Roeselare sitting around a dining table strewn with maps and brochures from around the area. The proprietor, Lex, was a soft-spoken 40-something with a little gray in his short-cropped black hair, and he always seemed to carry himself with the upturned lips of a natural smile. But in this impromptu war room he was deliberately stern in his persona as General Lex. He grasped a wooden stick and pointed out museums and historical sites with a staccato thwap as he debriefed us on the region.

Tom knew Lex from earlier trips to the country, and he had offered to arrange as many local introductions as he could. With every thwap against the table I got dizzier in the swirl of proper nouns. "How can they have so

## **PACKING LIGHT**

## WHEN TO GO

For this tour I decided to move away from a traditional outfit, with panniers or a trailer, and reached instead for the ultra-light mountain bike touring bags that a friend had recently used on the Tour Divide. Airline baggage surcharges can be outrageous, and some foreign taxi cabs quite small, making off-the-bike logistics a hassle with bulky panniers. For this trip we weren't camping, the weather looked consistently mild, and the density of towns and shops in Europe meant that supplies or a little more

all of my gear into the Ranger frame bag, the Handlebar Harness, the Viscacha seat bag, and a small zipper bag that mounts to the top tube, behind the stem. They call this last piece the Gas Tank, which alludes to how easy it makes having snacks and a camera available at all times. The Revelate Designs gear is all built for mountain bike geometry, but I didn't have any trouble getting it to fit a 60cm cyclocross

The frame bag is designed for a much smaller main triangle, but fastened securely enough to the top



food was never far away. It's probably not the way to go for every tour, but a "light is right" approach to riding in Europe served me well. I used a few different bags from Revelate Designs, a mountain bike touring equipment manufacturer out of Anchorage. I managed to get tube and seat tube, and the little void between the bag and the down tube left just enough space for a water bottle cage. The bag design also provided an unexpected boon in that it didn't require eyelets or hardware to mount. This makes it easier to tour on non-touring-specific bikes like the many that we found available to rent for reasonable prices in Belgium.

Riding with the bulk of the touring weight tucked neatly near the center of gravity was a dream. I certainly wasn't setting any speed records out there, but the bike was nimble and equally at home on fast descents and during tenuous city navigation.

For two weeks on the road. I had to leave a few creature comforts behind but generally had everything I wanted. I brought:

- 2 pairs of riding shorts
- 2 jerseys
- · 3 pairs of underwear
- 3 pairs of socks
- 1 pair of casual pants
- 1 pair of casual shorts
- 1 pair of nylon running shorts
- · 1 quick-drying pack towel
- 1 toiletry bag
- · 1 fleece jacket
- 1 pair of cool-weather gloves
- 1 pair of leg warmers
- 1 pair of arm warmers
- 1 rain jacket
- 1 book (paperback)
- 2 notebooks
- 1 netbook computer (10.2-inch screen)

It might not be right for every tour, but a minimalist approach to bike touring isn't just for mountain biking anymore.





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



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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 Flanders 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 country-

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 complacence. 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-

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