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BRUSSELS “IN YOUR SPORRAN”

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About this guide

This series of downloadable NATA Mini “In Your Sporran” Guides has been designed specifically to save the hassle of printing out reams of NATA web pages in order to make sure you don’t miss something whilst wandering the back streets of your chosen destination.

This guide has been compiled almost exclusively by me (Paul Allison), and is based entirely on personal experiences and opinions. Please do not prejudice anything on my say so – not only am I quite warped, but many places were only visited once, and therefore may have been having a particularly good or bad day.

This guide is not intended to replace more traditional sources of information, such as the excellent Lonely Planet guide books or the indispensable “In Your Pocket” guides available local in many Eastern European cities (as well as the downloadable versions from www.inyourpocket.com, which have inspired this very guide). Instead, the idea is to supplement these more detailed, better researched and more balanced guides with my own ramblings.

These guides originally came about as people were forever asking for pub tips and the like for places I’ve been to – I soon grew tired of typing out the same emails every few weeks and opted instead to keep the information on the web on the NATA Online site.

All opinions expressed in this guide are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Netley Abbey Tartan Army.

- For more information about NATA (the Netley Abbey Tartan Army), including photos and diary accounts of many trips abroad with Scotland, as well as much more travel information and guides), please visit www.netleyabbeytartanarmy.com
- For more information on me, please visit www.paulallison.co.uk



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Belgium Introduction

Often pilloried as “boring”, Belgium is a real gem. I’ve only been to Brussels, which you can read about below, but I have heard that Leuven, Ghent, Antwerp and Bruges (very touristy!) are all well worth a visit in it’s own right.

The country is rightly famous for it’s beer and it’s chocolate, but it’s cheese and other cuisine are pretty spot-on as well. The people are also very friendly, if somewhat eccentric at times, and in no way are to be confused with the Dutch or the French!

Brussels Introduction

Brussels is one of my favourite cities in Europe. When you arrive at Gare du Midi, don’t be put off by the surrounding area (a bit grubby) - either walk up Rue du Midi for about 15 mins to the Grand Place, take an underground tram to the Bourse, or get a taxi to the centre (assuming you hotel is in the centre). We used “A Great Weekend in Brussels” (costs around a fiver, and is a thin small book) and a fold-out “sporransized” map (you’ll find them on the counter in Waterstones) and these were great to get by with.

Beer-wise, you’ll be spoilt for choice. Be warned, some is as strong as 14% (Kasteel double and triple), and the bitter-tasting trappist beers all check in around 8%! Stella is the weak option over there! Fruit beers are very good: Helen swears by Framboise (raspberry), and I also like Lambic and Faro (as well as Duvel, Orval and Kwak). Be warned, Belgium can be pretty laid back, and waiters can take a while to the bring the beer to your table. Maes and Jupiler are normal draught lagers (around 5%), but “real” Belgian beer always comes in bottles and is served with the correct glass - to see this taken to extremes, I really recommend having a “Kwak” (seriously - you’ll thank me for that!), just make sure you have a camera handy!

Here’s a brief rundown of things we’ve done and liked...



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Brussels by area

There’s a lot of diversity, for such a small and manageable metropolis:

- **Grand Place/Bourse** - This is the central area, so very touristy, but lots to do and see, and lots of places to drink.
- **Schumann** - This is the EU area, reachable by metro. It’s big, with wide streets and huge EU buildings, as well as lots of Irish pubs (if that’s what your looking for, but then, if it was, why not go to Dublin instead!?)
- **St Gery** - If you walk from the GP past the Bourse, you’ll come to the St Gery/St Catherine area. Full of old cobbled streets, curious shops (antiques and taxidermists!) and trendy bars.
- **Anderlecht** - a huge working class (and largely non-descript) area stretching from the Gare du Midi right round and up past the back of St Gery. Home to the famous FC Anderlecht (who have a rather fetching lilac away kit). There’s a nice supporters bar (Le Coupe) right opposite the boxy ground, if you feel the need.
- **Les Marolles** - Marolles is a working-class bohemian area near the centre (south of the GP, west of the Rue du Midi - look for Rue de Haute on a map). There’s loads of antique shops and wee bars with their own traditions - we really liked this area.

Things to see and do

- See! Not as boring as you heard, and in any case, the beer itself (and the pubs) are a tourist attraction in their own right!
- **Mini Europe** - second or third last stop on the metro, only 1 away from the Heysel stadium, Mini Europe has models of famous sights and is really worth a visit. When I was there, you could buy a joint ticket for...



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- **The Atomium** - the big atom-like structure, with a fast lift up to the top for the sights, and escalators back down. Just a few minutes walk from Mini Europe - you can't miss it!
- **Grand Place (GP)** - right in the centre of town, and famed for its medieval architecture. There's a sound and light show around 10-10.30pm every night. Be warned, the bars and restaurants on the square (and on the nearby famous Rue des Bouchers, with all the fish restaurants) are mostly renowned rip-off spots and not really favoured by the locals.
- **The Mannekin Pis** - but only to see how crap it is! It's tiny - laugh at the crestfallen faces of gullible tourists who thought it would be much bigger.
- **The Jannekin Pis** - like her Mannekin brother, but squatting. Tasteless to the extreme, but keeps the ultra-feminists and dirty mac brigade happy. Hidden on a side wall of a dead-end alley off the Rue des Bouchers.
- **Chocolate Museum** - the Chocolate museum is in the South-East corner of the GP, and I didn't really think it was worth a visit, a bit like...
- **The Brewery Museum** - Again, SE corner of GP, just diagonally across. The admission does include a glass of pretty ordinary beer, but all you get is to look at some chrome tubs and watch a very uninteresting video. Not a patch on...
- **The Cantillon Brewery** - between the GP and the Gare du Midi (to the left of the main road), is Brussels sole remaining authentic lambic and gueuze brewery. Well worth the trek (around 10-15 minutes from the GP), a few Euros gets you a self-guided tour (with an English language pamphlet) and two glasses of the good stuff. The best bit is that you can buy extra glasses or even 75ml bottles at near cost price and enjoy them in the bar bit (complete with toilets, should you need them!), whilst deciding what to buy from their excellent shop (we ended up with a lambic jug).



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- **An open-top bus tour** - from outside Central Station or the Palais du Justice, a variety of buses with multi-lingual commentary ply their trade. As ever, a good way to get your bearings.

Places to drink

You're in for a real treat! (The first 6 listed are all very close to the Grand Place):

- **A La Mort Subite** - you really need to visit here. They sell an eponymous range of beers (the Faro is my favourite, but it's quite sweet), including some superb fruit beers (peach, raspberry and cherry). They also do cheap and filling bar snacks (like omelette with a massive slice of bread). Be warned: the waiters can be grumpy and there are cheaper places to drink!
- **Delirium Café** - I have seen the future of Belgian Beer, and it's name is the Delirium Cafe! Not cheap, but it does have over 2,000 different beers served by expert bar staff. Can take a while to see the menu (it's built like a phonebook!), then make a choice, then wait for the bar staff to locate it and bring it up from the cellar, but it's well worth the wait! An excellent selection of real gueuzes and krieks. Up a wee alley off Rue des Bouchers and opposite the Jannekin Pis.
- **A La Beccase** - on a side street near the Bourse, look for the blue and red neon sign pointing down an alleyway. A La Beccase serves a flat, sweet Lambic (brown and white varieties) out of vases. A wee bit similar to proper cider, you won't believe you're drinking beer.
- **L'Image de Nostradame** - come out of A La Beccase and look left - you'll see its sister pub L'Image diagonally opposite. An okay place with a good beer list and very bad toilets.
- **Au Bion Vieux Temps** - The next alleyway along from L'Image. This is my favourite normal bar in Brussels - red velvet seats and flock wallpaper, with toilets the barmaid has to buzz you into.



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- **Toone Theatre** - on a cobbled street between Rue des Bouchers and the GP (I think it's called Petit Rue des Bouchers), the Toone Theatre is a puppet theatre with a bar on the ground floor.
- **Le Maison des Brassuers** - on the NE corner of the GP and brews its own - ask to buy a "palette" and you get four different types of beer to taste. They do food, but again due to location, it's not the cheapest.
- **L'Archiduc** - This is the only trendy bar I'd recommend. It's in the St Gery quarter, and is open 4pm-4am. It's very 1930s art-deco and decadent, with a big grand piano in the middle of the floor, and sometimes you need to ring a bell to get it.
- **The bars of Les Marolles** - the whole of Rue de Haute in Marolles is full of wee cafe-bars that are well worth a visit. We strolled down here on a hot Saturday afternoon and had fun watching the oddballs in action (including a bar owner with his jeans round his ankles getting one his customers to tell him what size his trousers were).
- **Falstaff** - classic old style cafe-style bar facing the south side of the Bourse, serving food and drink late into the night (at quite a premium). Favoured by guide books, but not worth going out of your way for. Head instead to...
- **Le Cirio** - would be facing Falstaff but for the Bourse in the way! A very ornate interior and a good terrace for people-watching.
- **La Lunette** - named after the bucket-sized glasses over the bar (in which everything seems to cost 10 Euros). Don't worry - they do normal sized beers at normal sized prices (for the city centre) too!
- **Greenwich** - Absolutely superb famous backstreet cafe. Pull up a chair and a chessboard, but be wary of taking on the expert locals. Very chilled, very big, and very antiquated toilets! Close to L'Archiduc but far closer to true Brussels life than most of the other bars above (Marolles excepted!).



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- **L'Ecuyer** - a much more basic bar just over the road and around the corner. Earthy!

A winter weekend in Brussels

The following is a diary-style excerpt of an email sent just after returning from celebrating my birthday in Brussels (November 2005):

First things first, late November is a great time to travel. Gatwick was like a ghost town, both leaving and coming back, and Brussels was the quietest I've seen it in five trips - perhaps people are waiting for December's Christmas markets? Anyway, this is a story of beer, not sight-seeing (we've already seen the sights on previous visits). You have been warned.

After a very bumpy flight through the looming snow clouds, it was out and about into the start of a blizzard. Our hotel was right opposite the station (part of the reason for the trip was to get a free night in Le Meridien as our points were about to expire), and the plan was to stay nearby on Friday night and maybe head further afield (maybe a second visit to Cantillon) on the Saturday. A La Mort Subite is one of our old favourites, being one of the first bars we ever went into, and Helen loves the Framboise, so it was our first port of call for a couple of Faros (me) and Framboises (Helen) to wash down the obligatory half-cooked omelette. By now, the snow was coming down hard and lying, making progress slow in order to stay on our feet. We cut through the arcade and Rue des Bouchers for shelter, and headed for L'Image du Nostredame and Au Bon Vieux Temps, two small bars at the end of alleyways off Rue Tabora near the Bourse. Nostredame was playing host to some kind of anarchic Belgian karaoke (more fun that it sounds), and I was able to sample a Boon Oude Gueze Mariage Parfait and a Rochefort 8 (Helen stayed on the raspberry juice); Bon Vieux Temps next door was empty, and out of Westvleteren, so I played it safe and went for my reliable standby - Orval. We made it into Delirium just after midnight, and the place was heaving, mostly with drunk American student types. The only seats were at the bar, and the phone-book-sized menus were all in use, so I bowled straight in with a request for Westvletern Abt (very nice) before keeping my promise of "just one



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more beer" by trying a Rodenbach Grand Cru (probably my "find" of the trip, as it's a beer I could have again and again).

We were in no rush to get out and about on the Saturday, as the scene from our hotel window showed the snow/frost covered streets to be a bit on the treacherous side (no grit on the pavements) - we abandoned our plans to go to Cantillon on practical grounds. Instead, we headed to Toone for our first beer of the day - a Cantillon Gueuze for me and a Jupiler for Helen (a weird one - she wanted to stay off Framboise at first to allow her to try some different stuff). Next up was Delirium again (well, it was just around the corner!) - the plan was to have a couple of beers whilst it was quiet and we could peruse the menu, then head off to another couple of bars, then come back to finish off. Best laid plans... Delirium was again really busy (around 5pm), but with only one (unfazed) barmaid to satisfy the baying crowds. There also seemed to be loads of punters ("umm, ah, what lagers do you have?", "three hot chocolates and a small lager"... arrgghh - what's wrong with every other bloody cafe in Brussels?!), so getting served with the minimum of frustration required no small amount of timing and skill! But enough of the bad: first up was a €20 bottle of Cantillon Lou Pepe Framboise 2001 (it was my birthday the week before, so I was still celebrating! And it was 75cl), which was nice, but not quite sweet enough for my sweetheart; she followed with a Hanssens Oudbeije strawberry beer whilst I went down the cherry route with a Drie Fonteinen Oude Kriek (a great beer - probably my favourite available kriek); Helen then went predictable with Mort Subite Framboise whilst I worked my way through a Sint Bernardus Prior (okay), another Rodenbach Grand Cru (wanted to check it wasn't just a one-off!), and a year-old, room temperature (I was given the choice) Orval (very good, and accompanied by some Orval flavoured saucisson) and to finish, a large bottle of 15 year old kriek from a closed brewery (I had wanted the gueuze, but they'd sold out - not cheap, but at €12.50 for something I can never try again, I'm not complaining). At this stage, it was leave or spend the rest of the night in the same place, so we upped sticks and made our way to L'Ecuyer, a pretty basic bar slightly to the north of the main action - a Rochefort 10 was the most interesting thing on the limited menu, and rounded off the night nicely. We wandered back towards the kebab street considering another beer, but decided it would be better to rise and drink another day (albeit briefly, as our flight was late afternoon).



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The plan for Sunday was our traditional "last day in Brussels" lunch at Mort Subite, but as they had decided not to open by 12.15pm (there was movement inside, but it was freezing outside, and there's no telling when they'll decide to open the doors!) we headed back through the galleries and down to the Grand' Place, where we chanced the locked looking doors of the brewpub on the corner (that always seems to be completely arbitrary with it's own opening hours). The doors were open, but the place was in complete darkness - this was okay, the barmaid assured us, they were having a power cut so no food but the pumps were working fine. I plumped for a palette (which I always gravitate towards when I see them, but this is the third time I've been in this place, so you'd expect me to know what I like by now!), and sampled a blonde, a double blonde (that's what she told me!), a brune and a kriek (which was clearly just a blond with syrup, in a cynical attempt to cash in on the passing tourist trade). They also sell bottled Brussels Triple, but had run out of small bottles - to be fair, that didn't stop them popping the cork of a 75cl bottle and pouring me out a 33cl measure (at the lower price too) - I'd had the palette beers before, so this was a new experience.

All in all, an excellent weekend away, even if we didn't stray as far as we would have hoped. And all helped immensely by the Good Beer Guide Belgium, which I'd recommend to anyone - looking forward to the Good Beer Guide Germany coming out next summer.

Was this guide useful? Please let me know:
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