

Des Moines to Leuven Journal September 17 - 27 2023

Sunday, September 17

Shelley - We all made it safely to Brussels despite Jane's cramped middle seat on the flight from Chicago. 13 of us took the train to Leuven station where we were met by Host Coordinator Greta and club President Dany. Ron and Elyse had arrived by train from Paris and were waiting for us. We had a delicious charcuterie welcome lunch at a Brasserie Van de Weyer, across the square from the train station. This was the beginning of many food adventures the ambassadors experienced while in Belgium.



After lunch and a drive around orientation to Leuven, we went to my hosts' home where I met their huge German Shorthair Pointer, Bruce, who is more like a human than a dog. Dany prepared the traditional stoofvlees (caramelized onions and beef that has been braised slowly in beer) and small boiled potatoes for dinner – it was rich and delicious. Forget Belgium beer – we enjoyed wine with all our dinners.



Monday, September 18 – Touring Leuven

Jane - Our first day of touring Leuven began with the Groot Beguinage (French spelling) (Dutch spelling Begijnhof). The beguinage started sometime around 1232-1234. It was established as a community for single women who dedicated their lives to God but were not required to take vows as they would have in a convent. They provided social care to the poor and sick but were free to leave if they wanted, for instance to marry. Everyone contributed through work to keep the community running. Beguines lived in the Leuven community until approximately the 1980s when the University of Leuven took over the property and uses the quarters currently to house students and teachers. The site is now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

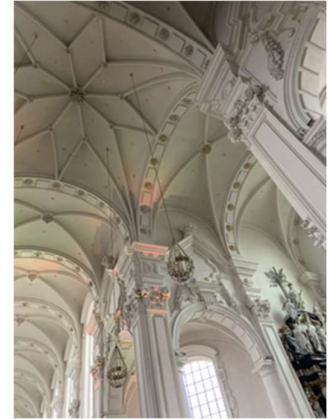




Mike - Ronda and I took the train from our host's town of Haacht to meet the rest of our group at the Leuven train station. After we left the Beguinage, Dany took us to St. Anthony's Chapel where Father Damien is buried. Father Damien served people banished to the island of Molokai (Hawaii) because they had leprosy. After eleven years of caring for the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of those in the leper colony, Father Damien contracted leprosy and died in 1859.

Dany told us that much of old Leuven had been destroyed by the Germans in WWI. Much of that had been rebuilt in the old style.

We then walked to De Blauwe Schuit (the Blue Bird) restaurant for an excellent lunch of spaghetti Arrabiata.



Shelley – One of my favorite places in Leuven was St. Peter's Church and its beautiful arches. The belfry and bell tower are UNESCO World Heritage sites.



The interior is as fascinating as the outside – filled with beautiful stained glass windows, an elaborate oak pulpit, tombs of the famous, and paintings considered masterpieces.



Outside De Blauwe Schuit were several trees with fascinating seed pods. They were Turkish Hickory trees. Since bringing the seed pod into the US is illegal, I had to be satisfied with a photo.

Did I mention that Leuven has 100,000 residents, 50,000 students, and what seems like 1,000,000 bikes! I spent a lot of time moving out of the way of the cyclists.



The photo to the left is the very ornate Leuven Town Hall. Built in a Brabantine late-Gothic style between 1439 and 1469, it is famous for its ornate architecture, crafted in lace-like detail. It looked like a very busy wedding cake.

The photo to the right is Oude Markt ("Old Market"). The square is lined by many historical buildings and shops. Many prominent merchants lived there.



We walked and walked in Leuven, seeing many historic buildings and learning the history of this important University town. The members of Friendship Force of Leuven are justifiably proud of their city.



IOWA CONNECTION While on the walking tour of Leuven, we stopped at The Library of the Catholic University Leuven (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) or UK Leuven and heard its story of destruction and rebuilding. During World War I, German occupation and British blockades caused mass food shortages in Belgium. Through the efforts of Herbert Hoover and the Commission for the Relief of Belgium, over 9 million people a day were fed in Belgium and Northern France.

This library was burned by German his library was burned by German

soldiers at the beginning of WWI, destroying approximately 230,000 books, 950 manuscripts, and 800 other items.

After WWI, a new library was erected on the Ladeuzeplein. It is of neo-Flemish-Renaissance style, designed by the American architect Whitney Warren and built between 1921 and 1928. Our group had our photo taken with the bust of Herbert Hoover in the library.



For dinner, my hosts prepared salad and the traditional Tomate Crevettes which is tiny grey shrimp, mixed with mayonnaise, and stuffed in a tomato. The tiny shrimp is less than a centimeter long and has a grey-pink color. Its flavor is a combination of subtly sweet and mildly salty. BTW, the mayo Greta used in the stuffing was lemon mayonnaise and so delicious I brought a jar home.

Tuesday, September 19 – Touring Bruges

Charlotte - What has 16 museums, 55 chocolate shops and 7 million tourists? It's Bruges!



After a pleasant 90-minute train ride we arrived in Bruges. Despite the many tourists we were able to see the Bruges swans, the Princely Beguinage Ten Wijngaerde (now a convent for Benedictines), Hospital of St. John (now a museum and art gallery), the Church of Our Lady, and the impressive Bruges City Hall that was built in a late-Gothic style between 1376-1421.



After a leisurely lunch of stoofvlees, salad, and Belgian fries at Den Hazaar (the fighting Arab) we were ready for the afternoon activities.

Else - We saw the beautiful lace that Bruges is known for, and we visited the Church of Our Lady to see the most visited work of art in Bruges - the Madonna of Bruges, a marble sculpture by Michelangelo of the Virgin and Child. The work is also notable in that it was the first sculpture by Michelangelo to leave Italy during his lifetime.



Shelley – In the afternoon, we took a canal boat ride to view the city from a different, and quite beautiful, angle. There are few places where you can actually access or walk next to the canal since it's lined with buildings. The main views are from the few and often

crowded bridges that cross the water. The boat ride was necessary to really experience the canals and the beautiful buildings built next to the water.

Wednesday, September 20 – Touring Brussels

Note: Ginny and Joan had their own program during their stay in the Netherlands.

Ginny - Joan and I stayed in the southwest coast of the Netherlands in Oost Souburg, a village of 11,000 inhabitants.

We visited Middelburg, 5 km from Oost Souburg, a town where 1/3 of its city center was destroyed in World War 2 and rebuilt in the same style after the war. We visited the Marketplace and the beautiful Gothic Middelburg Stadhuis (town hall). The exclusive trade in wine, salts, and wood made the city prosperous. In front of the town hall my host instructed me to sit on a chair and peek through a small hole, so that I could see what was under the city. It turned out to be a 'jokechair' as water came out like you were peeing. We had a good laugh!!

Behind the town hall in a little courtyard, there are statues of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt. He gave a famous speech in 1941, about the four freedoms - Speech, Worship, Want, and Fear. The 'Four Freedoms Award' is given to someone in the world who fights for one of these four freedoms. Every other year that ceremony takes place in Middelburg in the presence of King Willem Alexander of the Netherlands. We also visited the Abbey, founded in 1123 by Norbertine monks, now used as a museum and government building.

After a delicious lunch in a very green environment with a lot of plants we went to Vlissingen, a harbor town. We went to Uncle Beach where the Allied troops came ashore in November 1944 to free the island of Walcheren from the German invaders. The Westerscheldt is a dangerous river, so special pilots are needed. We saw the pilot boats speeding to the huge ships who were waiting to enter the river and we saw the pilots climbing the ladder to reach the ship. We drove along the Boulevard and stopped at the sandy beach. I was impressed by the beautiful sugar-fine sand and to be so close to the water edge and see the ships passing by. We had dinner with the daughter and grandson of our host Conny. She made a typical Dutch dinner: 'Boerenkool stampot' (mashed potatoes, kale, bacon and smoked sausage, topped with gravy). Other new food we tried included Appelstroop (spicy apple butter), hagelslag (chocolate sprinkles), muisjes "little mice" made of aniseeds with a sugared and colored outer layer, all 3 are toppings on bread, and ontbijtkoek (honey cake). Sweets: boterbabbelaars (butterscotch), pepernoten (similar to German Pfeffernüsse), and stroopwafels (waffle cookie with caramel filling). We ended the day with a walk in the park with Conny. Ready for bed after good food, good conversation and walking 12000 steps! 😊

Ronda – The morning began for Mike and Ronda as we packed up to leave our first host home. Our luggage will be taken to Leuven and picked up by our second hosts. We had breakfast then walked ourselves to the train station in Maacht. We went to Leuven to meet up with others at 9:30 and go on to Brussels for the day.

Chris Aneca was our Brussels guide and gave us so much information about the city and its part in the EU. We saw many buildings of importance and walked many miles it seemed. We were told many things about how Brussels became the center for the EU. We saw many EU official buildings, a lovely park {only from afar, no time to go in}, the Palace of the King, the Grand Palace. We were told several stories about the Royal family, too. After ALL the walking, including a lot of stairs, we got to the restaurant La Rose Blanche for our delicious included huge lunch about 1 o'clock.

Larry - After lunch at La Rose Blanche in Brussels, our group split up to visit the shops that caught our curiosity and to stroll the cobblestone streets in the square of "Manneken Pis" (The Peeing Boy). We stopped to admire the old and still beautiful walkways, shops, and well-maintained ancient architecture. The interior of each shop had its attractive goods, enticing food, ever beckoning Belgian chocolate, jewelry, gift items, clothing. These were not "in and out shops". Their goods were quality and beckoning "buy me, bring me home". This was our introduction to "if its Belgian, it's quality!"

Thursday, September 21

Pat - After lunch at abbey café Het Moment (and purchases at the bakery, brewery, and gift shop), we took a brief exterior tour of Averbode Abbey. Our day host Gisèle wasn't sure where to take Mike, Rhonda and me. Shelley's hosts, Greta and Dany, suggested joining them to visit an observation tower overlooking the countryside, but we were also interested in finding a waffle. Gisèle hesitated to drive her small car through the rain on muddy back roads, and there might not be time to do both, but we persevered. The observation tower turned out to be an art piece, a stairway to nowhere in the middle of a corn field, Vlooyberg Tower.



A gussied up waffle.



Then we found an unassuming but very pleasant café in Teruven to split a waffle four ways. It was a “real” waffle, not one of those versions gussied up for the tourists. Yum! In the square in front of the café, parking spaces were each delineated by 4 brackets painted on the asphalt. A clever way to economize on paint?

Shelley – I took my hosts to dinner at The Troubadour, which specializes in Flemish dishes, in Leuven's city center. Dany had filet medallions, Greta had eel, and I had chicken cordon bleu. The cordon bleu was the best I've ever had. Of course, we also had Belgian fries.

Friday, September 22

Ginny and Joan rejoined the group at the Farewell Party.

Shelley – The Farewell Party was held in a small banquet hall at Bretoense Hoeve “Britton Farm” restaurant in Leuven. We had our choice of fish in white sauce or Guinea fowl with mushrooms. The dinner started with bubbly and several appetizers and ended with crème brulee and chocolate mousse. We enjoyed meeting all the hosts and many members we had not met earlier. The FF Leuven members are delightful – kind, funny, and welcoming. We hope they will visit Des Moines in the next few years.

Several of the ambassadors stayed in more than one home and had multiple hosts. Unfortunately, I didn't receive photos or diary entries from all the ambassadors. . . .





Saturday, September 23 - Free Day



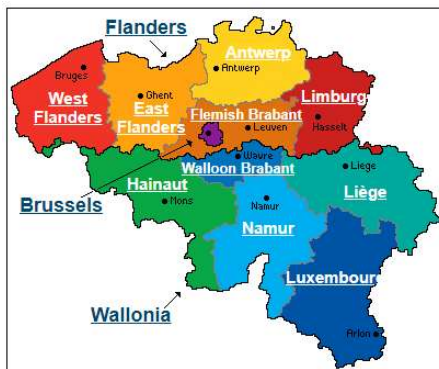
Shelley – Today, my host Dany took Jane and me to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. It was built to showcase King Leopold II's Congo Free State in the International Exposition of 1897. The museum reopened 5 years ago after a 5-year €66 million renovation of the building and the exhibits. I learned a lot about Leopold II, who was granted a huge area of African by his fellow monarchs who divided Africa and its resources among themselves. The property and people were personally owned by Leopold II and not the Belgian state. The museum is now more sensitive and honest about the ravages of colonialism and the displays are modern and intriguing. I highly recommend it.



Sunday, September 24 – On to Brussels

Shelley – After a leisurely morning, we took the train the Brussels, found our hotel, which was conveniently located, and started exploring the city.

Monday, September 25



Pat - As a retired French teacher I took advantage of some free time to pursue a few interests I didn't think anyone else would share. I spent a couple of hours watching video recordings of one of Belgium's most famous performers at the Jacques Brel Foundation, for example. I went shopping at Pèle-Mèle, Brussels' huge used bookstore and replenished my supply of French novels. And also replaced my copy of a book of Brel's lyrics. Although there are a majority of French speakers in Brussels itself, Leuven is in the Flemish area, so I took a train to Namur, the capital of the Walloon part of the country. It felt quite different, colder, but I'm not sure why. There I took a cable car up to the Citadel, which dates back to 937, for a tour of the extensive and spooky underground passages.

Shelley – Several of us went to Ghent on a bus tour that included a brief walking tour and then time on our own. The city has a long history going back to 650, when two abbeys were established. Whenever I visit cities like Ghent, it sets me off into a flurry of reading about the history and architecture of the city. I would love to return someday.



Tuesday, September 26

Else - Ron and I went to Antwerp on our last full day in



Belgium. Werpen is a Dutch word meaning hand and according to folklore a man by the name of Antigoon built a fortress along the city and asked for tolls from ships sailing down the river. He cut off the hands of those who could or would not pay the toll. One day Silvanus Brabo sailed down the river and refused to pay. He defeated Antigoon, cut off his hand and threw it into the river.

In 1887, Jef Lambeaux sculpted the Brabo Fountain which stands in front of the city hall in Antwerp. It shows Brabo has just cut off the hand and is throwing it into the river. It is the symbol of Antwerp and symbolizes free waterways.

The artwork on buildings in Antwerp was impressive. I wish we had spent more time there.

Shelley – Darlene and I visited Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. It was founded in 1801 by Napoleon and includes 6 separate museums. We concentrated on the Old Masters Museum which was more than enough for one visit. We particularly enjoyed the museum's garden and sitting among the roses and lavender. We had a late lunch at a pizza restaurant in the city center where Darlene had a fascinating conversation with the waiter about his life as an immigrant. We ended the day visiting several nearby chocolate shops for last-minute gifts.

Wednesday, September 27

Shelley – We said goodbye to Belgium. Ron and Else flew to Amsterdam for the first leg of their trip home, Bobbie and Roger flew to London for a few days, and the rest of us took a minivan for the short trip to the Brussels airport for our return to the US via Chicago.