

# Bruges: Where Past Meets Present

By KATHLEEN MOLLOY

"BRUGES LA MORTE," or deadbeat Bruges, is not a title that pleases the lovers of this medieval capital of Flanders, but at first sight it appears justified. The town has an authentic medieval air, as though a moment in history had been frozen and preserved forever. City ordinances decree that the quaint old-world façades of the houses shall be preserved, and everywhere one turns one comes across museums, reminders of the glories of Bruges' past. The canal which surrounds the city is still in use for commercial barge traffic (a situation which to an Irishman must appear truly medieval); streets are narrow, for the most part cobbled, and they inevitably lead onto small squares whose profusion is rivalled only by that of Bruges' many churches.

Belgian politics is not without its own brand of excitement. The two clear-cut linguistic regions, Flemish-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia, are evolving towards administrative separation and federation within the Belgian State. Brussels, which is bilingual, presents a problem, however, and the anomaly of the French-speaking section of the Catholic University of Louvain remaining within the Flemish zone sparked off the trouble which ultimately led to the fall of the Government during March of 1968.

For the tourist, however, Bruges' main attraction lies in capturing the atmosphere of the past: boatrides on the canals, trips around the town in jarvey carts, and visits to the museums and church interiors. Many of the museums house works by the Flemish masters — Van Eyck, Memling, Bosch—and many of the churches have their own treasures of precious objects and carvings, one even boasting a Michelangelo. The Michelangelo, a Virgin and Child, is housed in the church of Our Lady of Notre Dame and is said to be the only work of the Florentine sculptor preserved in Belgium.

Bruges claims to be the home of the region's original stock exchange, a premises first owned by the family Van der Buerze, whence the name "La Bourse" which in modern French usually refers to the Paris stock exchange. The same distinction is claimed by Antwerp.

The town is dominated by the

medieval belfry which overlooks the market square. Its tower resembles a three-stage rocket, the different stages having been completed in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and it inclines slightly to the east. The inclination (1/265) is imperceptible, however, and the prospects of this tower taking over from that in Pisa, when this latter finally bites the dust, are very remote indeed. It is not the highest building in Bruges. That distinction is held by the Church of Our Lady, already mentioned. Nevertheless, the belfry is to Bruges what the Eiffel Tower is to Paris. Reproductions of it appear on souvenir brooches and the comparison might be pushed a little further if we accept the tower's forty-seven-bell carillon as Bruges' own medieval equivalent of today's Eiffel Tower from which French radio and TV transmissions are broadcast. The carillon plays the Eurovision theme ninety-six times a day. Tourists who stay in Bruges for only a few days are enchanted by the bells; people staying for more than a week finally begin to wonder if the blessed things will ever stop, and those who stay for anything over a month just don't hear the bells anymore.

The basilica of the Holy Blood is located in the south-west corner of the town square. Built in the middle of the twelfth century, it houses a relic of the Holy Blood brought back from the second crusade in 1150 by the Count of Flanders. This event is commemorated every year by a procession depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments and the arrival of the relic itself in Bruges. The actual relic is brought up in the rear, followed by a number of white and negro bishops and as many city officials. The procession, originally conceived as a thanksgiving to God for bringing the relic to Bruges, has now become exclusively a tourist occasion, and the insistence of the organisers that it remains a religious exercise and that it should be viewed in this light is nothing short of blasphemous. The religious aspect has been retained, however, in the weekly veneration of the relic in the basilica and the kissing of the relic on Good Friday.

An unusual feature common to practically all the churches is the poster-type death notices stuck up

on the outside walls. This practice stretches back into history long before the arrival of the local newspaper.

The minnewater, or Lake of Love, is one of the most picturesque corners of Bruges. The lake, one of the two main centres for swans, is used as a back-drop for wedding photos. Nearby is the "Princely Beguinage," yet another quiet, quaint relic of Bruges's past. The Beguinages, latterly a sort of convent, go back to the end of the twelfth century and represented at the time an attempt to recapture the simplicity of early Christianity as distinct from the heavy conformity of conventional monasteries. Bruges' Beguinage became defunct in 1928, but it is now taken over by a religious congregation called the "Daughters of the Church." This congregation usually set up in institutions threatened with secularisation and keep up what is most respectable

of old traditions, preserving the old façade of the institutions and even wearing the old habits. The nuns now help the local clergy in running the parish and in "missionary" work, described in their brochure as "the infiltration of the dechristianised and pagan segments of society." The Bruges house also provides a liturgical information secretariat, a cut-price subscription service to magazines for priests, and organises correspondence courses in Latin, Gregorian Chant, and design. The nuns also make lace, a product for which Bruges is world-famous.

Bruges is also host to one of the newer European institutions, the College of Europe. The college grew out of the post-war European movement and was located in Bruges through the efforts of a local priest, Father Verleye. The highlight of the college year is the four-day seminar, "Bruges Week" at which original research papers are delivered by experts in the various fields of study covered by the college.

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**[Note:**

the author was Pól Ó Duibhir but the paper miscredited the article for which it subsequently apologised privately to the author.

Kathleen Molloy was the paper's Tourism Editor]