

A Road Less Travelled

The Road to Antwerp Beach – A Journey along the N1

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Photo by Derek Blyth.

When I moved to Brussels at the end of the 1980s, I was attracted more than anything by the historic cities of Flanders. I spent all my spare time walking around the streets of these extraordinary cities, simply fascinated by the richness of the architecture, the dark interiors of the churches, the unexpected glimpses of canals. I loved the hidden details, the places the guidebooks don't mention, like the secret course of the River Leie in Ghent, the walled gardens in Bruges and the strange emptiness of the left bank of the Scheldt in Antwerp. It felt as if I was living at the heart of one of the greatest urban civilisations in the world.

So why, I began to wonder, did Belgians not share this opinion? As soon as they could afford it, the people I knew were leaving the city, buying a plot of land on the edge of some little village, picking a house out of a Batibouw catalogue, and then spending ridiculous amounts of time arguing about the colour of artificial stone for the patio terrace. This was not happening in Florence, or Paris, or Prague, or Edinburgh, and I was not sure why it was happening in Flanders.

When I decided to drive from Brussels to Antwerp on the old N1 road, it was partly an attempt to discover the other Flanders, the space between the cities. I imagined that the whole journey would take a day at most. The total distance is 46 kilometres and the speed limit is normally 70 kilometres an hour. Even if I seriously dawdled along the way, I'd be in Antwerp by late afternoon, I thought; but I was wrong, and it took a day to cover the first 18 kilometres and two days to reach the end of the journey.

Willebroek Canal.
Photo by Derek Blyth.



Rubbish and royalty

The N1 used to be the most important road in Belgium. It linked Brussels, the capital, with Mechelen, the cathedral town, and Antwerp, the port. It was like the A1 in Britain, or Route 66 in America, or the Via Appia in Italy, a road that was more than just a means of getting somewhere. But now it is difficult even to find out where the N1 begins. It ceased to be the main road to Antwerp when the A12 was built, and lost any remaining significance when the six-lane E19 motorway was constructed. No one now uses it to drive from Brussels to Antwerp, which is exactly why I wanted to do it.

I picked up the road beside the Willebroek Canal in a fairly grim industrial zone. It runs past railway yards, gravel barges, car dumps and, somewhat unexpectedly, the grounds of the royal palace. I was surprised, and slightly comforted, to discover that the Belgian royal family has, as its next-door neighbour, the Brussels Region's rubbish incinerator plant. Even the Royal Brussels Yacht Club, further along the canal, sits in the middle of the Port of Brussels industrial zone, which is not necessarily the perfect spot to sit on a varnished wood deck sipping cocktails.

Chungking Boiled Bristles

The N1 leaves the city below the elevated section of the Ring motorway, which is normally jammed solid, because it is a real road that goes somewhere, unlike the N1, which is a road to nowhere, or at least to nowhere more important than Vilvoorde.

It was not part of the plan to stop in Vilvoorde, of which I knew very little, apart from a recollection that it was here that William Tyndale was executed as a heretic. This did not seem a good reason to stop, especially as I was feeling slightly heretical myself, travelling to Antwerp on the N1 rather than the motor-



Welcome to Vilvoorde.

Photo by Derek Blyth.

Vilvoorde library.

Photo by Derek Blyth.

way. But then I happened to glimpse the main church, an appealing Brabant gothic building, and decided that it might be worth taking a quick look around the town. Even then I was not expecting much, and so I put two 50 cent coins in the meter, allowing me an hour of parking, which seemed more than enough.

I was of course wrong about Vilvoorde, which is a fascinating Flemish town, though William Tyndale may not have agreed. I found a little museum devoted to the Protestant martyr, though it was closed that day. It occupies a quite strange chapel at the end of a courtyard where I also noticed two large orange pumpkins sitting on a wooden crate stencilled with the words 'Chungking Boiled Bristles'.

I was still thinking about boiled bristles as I entered the gothic church and discovered one of the most astonishing gravestones I have ever seen. It depicts a medieval Flemish knight who chose to have himself represented on his gravestone as a decaying corpse. That was not the only surprise. The church, which is kept open by volunteers, is a fascinating place full of odd details, such as an elaborate baroque pulpit which originally stood in a church in Antwerp and a set of baroque choir stalls from the Abbey of Groenendael. I spent a long time looking at the stalls, which are carved with plump cherubs, monsters and angels, but the most captivating details were the wooden figures which, I found out later, are carrying symbols of the Passion of Christ.

I was already feeling positive about Vilvoorde when I went inside the library on Grote Markt, and discovered a warren of intimate rooms, stained glass windows, iron staircases and a remarkably rich collection of English literature. My brief tour of Vilvoorde ended in a quite grand café located in a converted nineteenth-century meat market. I could easily have spent longer in this attractive town, but it was getting late and I was still only twelve kilometres from Brussels.

Utopia...kind of...

The N1 turns into a four-lane highway on the west side of Vilvoorde, passing houses that were built in the Thirties in an optimistic modern style, using glazed tiles, rounded corners and metal balconies. It struck me that these were the first utopian houses, built by families searching for a new life outside the cities. They now seem a bit depressing, as if Utopia had failed to arrive.

Then I made a little detour. I was looking for Het Steen, the country house that Rubens bought in 1635. I knew it was close to Vilvoorde, but the landscape seemed flat and empty, not at all as it appears in those romantic landscape paintings, such as *A View of Het Steen in the Early Morning* in London's National Gallery. I was about to give up when I noticed a country house hidden in the trees. There was no sign to say that this was Het Steen, but I was convinced by the look of the building and the muddy lane running through the wood. The sun by that time was low in the sky, and as it shone through the green stained-glass windows, casting long shadows on the lawn, I could easily imagine Rubens, a bit stiff with old age, strolling across the lawns, playing the country gentleman.

On the way back to the N1, I drove past a row of new villas in a variety of eclectic styles – Old Flemish, Modernist, Dallas – and it struck me then that the owners were living a romantic myth that went back as far as Rubens. He was one of the first city dwellers to discover the sensual pleasures of the Flemish countryside, and in so doing inspired an urban exodus that has now virtually destroyed the landscape.

It was getting dark and I realised that it was going to take longer than I had imagined to reach Antwerp. So I turned around, took one last look at Het Steen, and drove back to the city. It took no time at all, because all the traffic was coming out of Brussels, returning to Utopia.



Our Lady of the N1.
Photo by Derek Blyth.



Villa near Elewijt.
Photo by Derek Blyth.

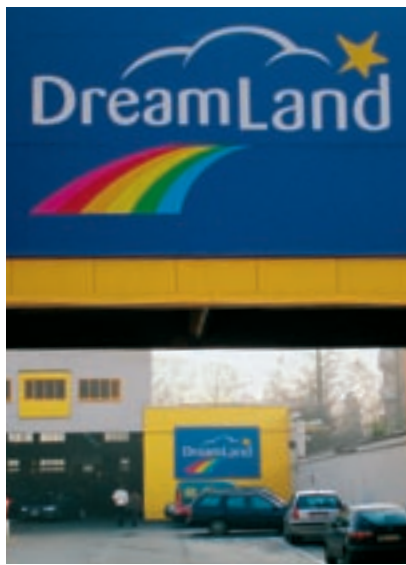


Photo by Derek Blyth.

The mystique of the duffel coat



Cornelius Kilianus
Dufflaeus, Duffel.
Photo by Derek Blyth.

Back on the N1 on a bitterly cold February morning, I had driven through Mechelen, and was waiting at traffic lights when I noticed a sign pointing to Duffel, 4 kilometres away. I had always wanted to visit Duffel, mainly because of the name, so I turned down the road and parked near the centre. I was half expecting a small museum of local history that would explain the origin of the duffel coat, but there was nothing. If Duffel had been in Britain, I realised, there would have been a Duffel Heritage Centre and no doubt several shops selling duffel coats and bags. This is partly explained by the romantic mystique of the duffel coat in Britain, where this garment – with its distinctive hood, toggles and rope ties – evokes heroic war films starring the inevitable John Mills, battling the sea in the thick of an Atlantic storm, muffled up in a duffel coat.

I visited the town archives, partly to escape the biting wind, but also in the hope of finding an entire section devoted to the famous coat. The archivist was very helpful and searched through the records, but all he could come up with was one small photocopied monograph on the local cloth industry published about twenty years ago. I found out from this that Duffel was known in the Middle Ages for a distinctive type of cheap, coarse cloth mainly worn by the poor. The cloth was exported to England and Lübeck and even Riga, and ended up in America as one of the cheap items, along with glass beads and nails, that the Dutch gave to the Indians in exchange for Manhattan.

But who invented the duffel coat? I had assumed that it had originated in Duffel, but the archives contain no evidence of this. I did some research later, and came across a source that suggested that the duffel coat was developed in the 1890s as a garment for British naval officers. It was made of thick wool cloth from Flanders, but it can't have come from Duffel, as the local cloth industry had died out by then.

On the way back to the car, I passed a statue to Cornelius Kilianus Dufflaeus, who was born in Duffel in 1530. Cornelius is celebrated as a poet, translator,

proof reader and compiler of the first dictionary of the Dutch language. As I admired the statue I wondered idly if he ever wore a duffel coat, but I somehow thought not.

A Bavarian beer hall and Elvis on St Anna Beach

I was soon back on the N1, driving past a more recent strip of utopian architecture, glimpsing white houses, round porthole windows and low industrial buildings. Yet there was a stubborn rustic element here, a bucolic fantasy with its roots in Bruegel, which was at its most whimsical in the various designs of roadside letter boxes at the end of each garden, some in the shape of thatched cottages, others resembling bird houses, but the most enchanting featuring plump cherubs perched on beer barrels. This, I think, may be Flanders' unique contribution to the history of road architecture.

Then I found the Bavarian beer hall, just outside Kontich. I already knew about this relic of the 1958 Brussels World Fair, or I would probably have driven straight past. This immense Bavarian tavern, which could seat 3,000 people, had been one of the highlights of the fair, but it was empty on the morning of my visit and also a bit depressing, at least to someone who had been hoping for a cheerful Bavarian waitress carrying six mugs of beer. A few months later it had been converted into a Chinese restaurant.



Goodbye, Bavarian
beer hall.
Photo by Derek Blyth.



Antwerp.

Photo by Derek Blyth.

I had by now reached the suburbs of Antwerp and was beginning to realise that the journey was near its end, and all that remained was to crawl through city traffic and hunt for a car park. And then I remembered there was a different route, and I moved cautiously into a lane that led to the Ring.

I was heading for the left bank of the Scheldt. I just had to drive through the Kennedy Tunnel and take the first exit. A broad boulevard with hardly any traffic led straight to the river. And there it was, the Cathedral, perfectly positioned at the end of a four-lane highway, separated by the broad river Scheldt, and looking just as it does in the famous view painted by Jan Bonnecroy in 1658.

Yet I did not stop there. I felt that a road trip needed a different ending, like Jack Kerouac sitting on a wrecked pier looking across to New Jersey, and so I followed the road around the bend in the river. It came to a dead end on the edge of a silver birch wood. I parked and walked through the trees. An icy wind was blowing as I reached the St Anna Beach on the Scheldt. This was the ending I had been hoping for, but it was too cold to stand around, so I started walking along the dike.

The far side of the river was lined with oil refineries, chemical plants, burning gas towers. But it was peaceful on the left bank, just mud flats and darting magpies and abandoned caravans. I passed a strange thatched cottage that looked like something in a fairy tale and finally reached the last building on the dike. It was a café, decorated with ship models and nautical maps, and completely empty. I sat down at a window table looking out on the river and then I noticed that they were playing an Elvis song, which seemed somehow the only possible music for such a strange lonely spot, which seemed more like New Jersey, at least to me. ■

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