

Life in Belgium

Our new home

2/2/09 Leuven

Our flight landed and we sat at the railway station in Brussels, waiting for our train to take us to our new home. It was dark already by the time we arrived. We didn't get to pay too much attention because of the jet lag, but we were happy to see that our new home was in an ugly building facing a beautiful building, so we are the ones with the nice view. We woke up at 4am and had a wander through our beautiful new city, with stunning buildings, a multitude of statues and a light dusting of snow. Our adventure begins...



Q and A about Belgium

3/2/09 Leuven

Knowledge about Belgium in Australia is very limited, so whenever we tell people we are moving to Belgium we get a host of questions. The regular questions - **how big is Belgium?** (**twice the size of Sydney**), **how many people?** (**10 million**), **what languages do they speak?** (**Flemish, French, German and Walloon**), **what is the national dish?** (**steamed mussels and fries**). Other questions range from the geographically limited (**does Belgium have a coastline? Is it near France?**) to the geographically confused (**what country is Belgium in?**), or from the culturally limited (**is it okay to wear bikinis in Belgium?**) to the culturally confused (**do you get danger pay for working in Belgium?**).

(for the geographically and culturally limited/confused - **yes, yes, it is its own country, no but only because it is too cold, no**).



This story may only be amusing to Belgians

4/2/09 Leuven

A friend of mine was telling me an amusing story about the language differences in Belgium, where Belgian French is considered by the French to be childish (in fact, on French TV a Belgian accent is often used to portray a silly character), while the Belgians find classical French to be excessively complicated. He was giving a talk in English at a French University (being

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Flemish he is more comfortable talking in English than French) and after his talk a Professor in the audience asked a technical question in French:

"Qu'est-ce que la plaque avez-vous utilisé?" ("What plate did you use?")

He replied in Belgian French: "**Nonante-six puits**" (literally "ninety-six wells")

The Professor replied: "**Nonante-six? Qu'est-ce que c'est en français?**" ("Ninety-six? What is that in French?") to much amusement of the audience, but my friend won with his retort (in English): "**That is four times twenty plus sixteen**".

(my apologies if I mangled the French beyond recognition)

Belgian banking

5/2/09 Leuven

We opened up our Belgian bank account today, and they are very security conscious about online banking. No simple password to open up your online banking page like in Australia or America, instead they give you a small portable card reader and when you log on to the bank website and put in your card details they give you a "challenge"(a series of random numbers) and you then have to insert your card into the card reader, enter the challenge, enter your pin number and you then get an "answer", which you can then use to answer the challenge on the website. I guess that stops anyone from using spyware to figure out your online log-in, because the challenge and answer is different each time, but I'm sure it will be a pain having to lug around the portable card reader with me.

Our commune

7/2/09 Leuven

I lost our first weekend in Belgium to an ear infection, but things are getting better now. After paying through the nose for health care in America I was worried at how much the doctors visit would cost us - because while I registered in our commune on Friday, until the registration is formalised I have to pay the full cost for health care.

The commune registration is very quaint. You have to line up at the town hall with your residence contract to prove that you



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live in the commune. Some time over the next week the police will make a visit to your house to ensure that you do indeed live there, then they will send you your registration card, which allows you access to health care, unemployment benefits and so forth.

Registration registers you in both a Community and a Region. Regions are basically States, with Flanders, Walloon and Brussels being the three Regions, with responsibility over most physical infrastructure. Communities are a parallel division of power, being responsible for intangibles such as language and culture, but also (oddly enough) health care. The three Communities are the Flemish, French and German. So someone living in Flanders will be registered in the Region of Flanders and the Flemish Community, someone living in the French part of Walloon will be registered in the Region of Walloon and the French Community, someone living in the German part of Walloon will be registered in the Region of Walloon and the German Community, while someone living in Brussels will be registered in the Region of Brussels and either the French or Flemish Community, depending on their choice (since Brussels is the only officially Bilingual city). The Communities and Regions are quite important, as the Federal Government has been

stripped of power by the Flemish-French dispute.



The Belgian health care system works as a multi-sector universal health-insurance system with third-party health providers financed through public taxation on the “solidarity principle”. The system was developed in 1894, and essentially means that every person has to register with a private “sick fund” of their choice, which are dominated by the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal funds. People do not pay anything to their health insurance directly, instead insurance funds only get money when people use health care services. When someone does use a health care service they pay a small percentage (depending on how vital it is - for life-saving services they pay nothing) and the health insurance fund pays the rest and claims reimbursement (plus an administrative cost) from the government. Since the government is obliged to pay without medical review, in Belgium the health insurance funds try to get everyone to access as much health care as possible, unlike America where they tend to do

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everything possible to keep people from using health care. As a result there is actually an oversupply of health care, no waiting lists, a hospital within 20km of every person and a doctor for every 300 people.

Luckily this meant I could just walk into a doctors surgery to get a prescription for my ear infection, and even paying full price due to a lack of a registration card the appointment was reasonable - just €30. Our worries about language issues were also unfounded, the doctor seamlessly switched from Flemish to English and seemed oddly embarrassed when he found the only flaw in his English ability - not knowing the English name for the skin lining the ear canal (do we even have a word for that?).

The University Library

8/2/09 Leuven

In the centre of the city the largest square, the Ladeuzeplein, is dominated by the University Library. The square is named after a former rector of the University, Monseigneur Paulin Ladeuze, but is still known as the Clarisse, the religious order who had a monastery that was pulled down in 1783 to build the square.

The University Library was first built in 1725, built in baroque style. However the original building was destroyed in 1914, when German troops set fire to it. It was rebuilt by Whitney Warrens in Low Countries neo-renaissance style in 1921 with aid from the universities in the United States. This aid is reflected in the building, which is inscribed with the names of the American universities who provided funding, sports an American Eagle holding an American flag and has the number "48" incorporated into the building to reflect the 48 states (such as the 48 bells of the carillon). The building was largely destroyed again in 1944 (ironically enough by American bombs), but was reconstructed according to the 1921 design.

There are two interesting statues in the square outside the University Library. The first is "Ode to Friendship", a statue of a hot air balloon rising up into the sky bearing three men and a dog. The



second statue, the Totem, was built in 2005 by Jan Fabre on a commission by the University to celebrate its 575th anniversary. Oddly enough, he created a 23 metre tall steel spike skewering a giant bug.

Garbage Day

9/2/09 Leuven

Everything is a travel experience when you are living overseas. It is interesting how some things

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are so much cheaper than you are use to, while others are incredibly expensive. We went to our local chocolatetier, Leonidas, and bought four exquisite Belgian chocolates to have for desert. We couldn't believe our ears when she asked for only 94 cents in exchange, and in fact she had to show us the receipt before we understood. Divine bread and gourmet cheeses are available far cheaper than you could get anywhere in Australia or America.

Other things, by converse, are far more expensive. A roll of 10 garbage bags? €20. Actually, it is a very clever system. Instead of paying a fixed fee for the service of garbage collection, in Belgium households pay instead a fee for brown garbage bags and collection is free. It is a very clever use of the financial incentive - in Australia you pay the same regardless of how much garbage you produce, while in Belgium if you halve the number of garbage bags you produce you halve the cost of garbage disposal. It also encourages recycling, as plastic bottles can be put out in a cheaper blue garbage bag, so separating out recycling saves significant amounts of money. Just woe betide anyone who attempts to dispose of regular garbage in a blue bag!



Divided in all things

10/2/09 Leuven

Across Europe lies what is called the "Antibiotic border". South of the border in the Romantic countries (France, Spain, Italy, etc) antibiotic use is very high, while north of the border in the Germanic countries (the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia, etc) antibiotic use is halved. This provides a differential selective pressure for antibiotic resistance, and indeed in southern Europe 25% of *Streptococcus pneumonia* infections are antibiotic resistant, while in northern Europe only 5% are antibiotic resistant. In what may be no surprise to Belgians, this "Antibiotic border"

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runs straight through Belgium along the language border, with the Flemish having lower antibiotic use and resistance and the Walloons having higher antibiotic use and resistance. Exactly why is the cause for much arguments (are the Walloons overly demanding for medication? Or is it a relic of coal mining and industrial history giving more frequent lung infections in the south?), but it is interesting that in this, as in many other things, Belgium is divided.

Dikke truiendag

12/2/09 Leuven

Tomorrow is "dikke truiendag", so the university is going to drop the heating down to 19 degrees. It is part of a Flemish government campaign to heighten awareness about energy usage and climate change, with the drop in temperature by a few degrees cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 7%. I'm not sure if the best approach is really to make a slightly cold day and encourage people to wear sweaters and provide free hot drinks to everyone, but at least they are promoting public awareness. For actual change though, it would be better if the public wasn't aware - just drop the temperature by half a degree every year, increase insulation and feed more wind power into the grid. Real progress will happen on climate change when people realise that their day to day lifestyle doesn't need to be effected.

House hunting in Brussels

14/2/09 Brussels

We had a nice lead on an apartment near South Brussels train station, so we hopped on a train from Leuven to Brussels. Lydia was tickled when the ticket lady gave her a chocolate bar for Valentine's day, covered in pink wrapping "For You : For your love". It was such a beautiful day that we got off the train at central station and walked around the



Grand Place. I wanted a chance to take photos of the beautiful Hotel de ville and Museum de la ville de Bruxelles, standing either side of one of the most beautiful town squares in Europe. We also saw Manneken Pis dressed up for carnival, then we took the train to south station. The apartment we were there to look at was rather cramped and in an old crumbly building, but up on the 11th floor the view was magnificent, looking out north onto the high town and south onto

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greater Brussels. It also had a view over beautiful Hotel des Monnaies, the type of view that makes up for a lot...

The Men of the Year and the statues of Leuven

14/2/09 Leuven

Leuven is packed full of odd little statues, partly because it has been an important town for hundreds of years, a centre of learning and religion, and partly because of the *Mannen van het jaar*, the "Men of the Year". This is a friends' association unique to Leuven, based around men who share a birth year. Each year has its own club with its own emblem, flag and costume, which are displayed in the Town Hall. When each circle turns 40 they start to organise activities, festivals or parades, one each year until they turn 50, which they celebrate with a major event, such as the unveiling of a new statue. The circle members are then called Abrahams and have no further obligations to organise events.

With our beautiful blue sky for Valentine's Day, we walked around the city to see a sample of the statues. There is Fiere Margriet (Proud Daisy), hovering naked above a rock. There is the Kattenpomp, built in 1729 to illustrate a traditional folk song:

*“Twee emmerkes water halen,
Twee emmerkes pompen,
De meisjes met hun klompen
De meisjes van de kattenstraat...”*

A crude translation doesn't seem to make any sense, but it *is* a folk song after all.

*“Two buckets of water,
Two bucket pumps,
The girls with their wooden shoes
The girls of Cat Street...”*

Just outside an apartment block on Brusselstraat is a small statue "De Koeieschieter" (the Cowshooters). The citizens of different towns around Flanders all have a nickname, and for Leuven they are called "Cowshooters". This is because of an event during the siege of 1691, when the Leuven militia heard footsteps in fog and bravely set up a formation to battle the approaching French army, who just turned out to be a herd of cattle. There is a statue to Paep Thoon, a jester at the Church in the 15th century, one to Erasmus (1467-1536), the famous scholar, reformer and a lecturer at the University of Leuven, and one to Edouard Remy, a 19th century industrialist who actually cared about the condition of workers. Another statue, outside the Augustinian convent on Brusselstraat is dedicated to Jozef de Veuster, who (as Father Damiaan) went to



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Hawai'i to look after lepers, insisting that their carers should live among the lepers rather than keeping them at arms length. He died in 1889 from leprosy.

Villers Abbey and Carnival for children

21/2/09 Villers le Ville

We were flicking through the list of Carnival festivals in French Belgium and came across Carnival for Children in Villers le Ville. Since the ruined Villers Abbey is meant to be one of the most spectacular sites (and, indeed, sights) in Belgium, we thought it would make a nice day trip. From our small Flemish town we could hop onto a train and watch as the small brick Flemish houses turned into French farm houses. The farmland and forests didn't seem to notice that we had crossed the language border.



In Villers la Ville we had delicious pastries at the local pâtisserie. One of the most delightful things about living in Belgium is how ubiquitous excellent food is. Good food is not reserved for special occasions, it is to be enjoyed every day.

Interestingly, the appreciation of good food in French culture is not as ancient as may be expected. It is

probably only in the the 16th century that French food started to diverge from English food. In England, the Protestant Reformation, in rebellion to the decadent ways of the Catholics, praised plain ordinary food that did not bring any sinful pleasure to the eater. Like sex, the God-given intent of the act was to be functional rather than pleasurable, although unlike sex the Protestants actually succeeded in ruining the pleasurable aspect of eating. In France, on the other hand, the 16th century ushered a period in which the art of eating was being refined, with gourmet chefs being brought in by Catherine de'Medici from around Europe to fashion a unique fusion cuisine for the tables of the French elite.

The menu of the elite was far different from that being eaten by the masses, until, as an unexpected consequence of the French Revolution, suddenly many great chefs were out of a job in the aristocratic houses and looking to feed the common people. The love affair with great food in everyday life has only grown stronger since.

Villers Abbey was surprisingly glorious. With no anticipation we had no expectation, and the sudden shock of the vine-covered ruins of a great building flicking past us on the train was a

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pleasant surprise. The Abbey was founded in 1146 for the Cistercian order, a Catholic order which placed great spiritual emphasis upon physical labour rather than intellectual pursuit. The site was greatly expanded in the 13th century, with an entirely new Abbey being rebuilt and 25,000 acres being controlled in a feudal manner by the Abbott.

In 1796, the Republican French administration closed the Abbey and sold it to a material merchant, who started to demolish it to sell as raw stone. Luckily, the market must not have been as all consuming then as it was today, for it left behind most of the framework of the Abbey, with mainly pillars and roofing stone being removed. Even half of the spectacular 300 foot long and 70 foot tall Church is fully intact, with the vaulting ceiling remaining strong despite the growth of vines and trees. The Cistercian Gothic style of the building lends itself to being appreciated in ruin. Unlike the ornate decadence of Catholic Churches best appreciated in full glory, the Cistercian aesthetic prohibited glory in the form of rich details or materials. Instead beauty was to be achieved only through the natural stone, with an emphasis on the mathematical design of harmony. Such a building displays very well even when left to the ravages of time for over 200 years, and I cannot imagine it being more beautiful if it were still intact.

The Children's Carnival of Villers le Ville was a small local affair, but one in which the town obviously threw its heart into. Led by a brass band a parade of costumed children entered the Carnival Hall to elect a King and Queen of the Carnival. Once there the children, dressed up as furry animals, pirates, trees, Indian Princesses, cowboys or bizarre combination of many things which interest children, were entertained by clowns. The plot of the show made little sense to



me, with the clown inviting a man up onto the stage then carefully seating him and, while elaborating shaving the man, sneaking swigs out of the bottle of red wine must to the delight of the children.

Possibly it would have made more sense if I understood French, but judging from the look of the other adults there the issue appeared to be age rather than language. The small differences were noticeable - very few parents had cameras out to record the moment, beer and wine were obviously available and were consumed without fuss in front of small children, and the street food stall outside was selling escargot.

Belgian Labour

21/2/09 Leuven

The cost of labour in Belgium is quite high. Taxes are the highest in Europe, at 55.4% (as an aside, while the taxes are used in a progressive manner, on health care, public transport and education for all, they are raised in a regressive

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manner, as there are no capital gains or wealth taxes to bother those born rich and the maximum income tax bracket kicks in at only €32,270, almost making it the wet-dream of the extreme right - a flat tax). Wages are also very high compared to the cost of living, even after tax, especially for low income jobs. In the academic world, a PhD student or post-doc in Belgium makes far more than they would in America, although at the upper end of the income scale the Professor makes several times less than their counterpart across the pond.

The Right tell us constantly that we need to drive wages down, as the high cost of wages drives up the price of goods (with the implication that consuming is of greater importance than earning a living) and wages that are too high will drive down the demand for labour (of course, it goes without saying that the Right are concerned only that the cost of blue collar wages are too high - for the elite of course high wages are perfectly acceptable). You would expect, therefore, that the Belgium economy would be orientated away from labour use.

Not so, we have noticed. In fact, labour use seems conspicuously higher. A new credit card is not sent to our mail box, instead it involved an hour-long visit with the bank manager. When we registered in our commune the administration lady pulled out a blue-print of our apartment building and confirmed which apartment was ours, so that our local policewoman (and I do mean local, our policewoman patrols just a couple of streets) knew which one to visit when she came to visit us, as they do all new residents. Our internet connection through clearwire gave only one bar and a man came straight out to play around with it, and when he found one location fixed the problems he helped rearrange the furniture - when the same happened in Seattle we rang up and were given phone directions as to the best position. The chocolatier gladly spends time helping us to decide which flavour to buy, even with other customers waiting patiently behind us. Waitors let you enjoy your table for as long as you desire, without any none-too-subtle hints to leave and maximise turn-over. In the fashionable stores lining the Bondgenotenlaan (and make no mistake - they are all fashionable stores) employees outnumber customers and stare serenely out of the windows. In the most fashionable stores employees even outweigh the number of items for sale.

Into the mountains

22/2/09 Verviers



As the train took us east from Leuven to Verviers the land slowly rose up and then turned positively hilly. We started to see more of towns than just the rows of little brick houses with their strangely elongated back yards - the small hills allowed houses and Churches to rise up above the countryside and stare down at us. By the time we reached Verviers the track even needed to cut through tunnels

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and arc across gulleys. Verviers itself is set in a valley, of the Vesdre River, and with the visible presence of houses lining the cliff tops looked much larger than Leuven, which is so flat you never see more than the next block, even though it is only half its size. Verviers took advantage of its days as an international powerhouse in the textiles industry to build a few nice monuments and statues, an investment which paid off as it left it a pretty enough town even hundreds of years after its heyday.

Cwarmé

22/2/09 Malmédy

From Verviers we caught a bus through the snowy highlands of Hautes Fagnes to the town of Malmédy, in the German-speaking Eastern Cantons of Belgium. The Eastern Cantons only became part of Belgium in 1920, after they were annexed from Germany as part of the Treaty of Versailles after the end of World War I (as compensation for Germany violating Belgium's neutrality in the Great War). They were called in Belgium the *cantons rédimés*, the "redeemed cantons", because originally they had been part of the loose Belgian area, being taken over by Prussia following the redrawing of the map of Europe at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.



We were in Malmedy to see the famous Cwarmé carnival. The celebration is an ancient one, with the earliest recorded document in 1459 implying that the tradition was well established even then. It has been banned several times but has always rebounded. Cwarmé is a simply delightful event. It is fun, participative, genuine and historic - the fifteen costumes worn can stretch back hundreds of years and include not just a costume but an entire persona, with rights and obligations, rules and exceptions. With ease, Cwarmé is the parade which I have enjoyed the most, laughing at loud with pure delight and anticipating the next quirk.



Before the parade a brass band marches la Haguète to the town square. La Haguète are dressed in rich velvets with large coloured ostrich feathers pluming from their hats. They carry around a hape-tchâr (flesh snatcher) which was originally designed to immobilise lepers. During the medieval dance they use it to make noise and in display, but later on in the parade they would pinch bystanders on the legs with it, until they

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would bow down and beg for mercy "Pardon, Haguète, à l'cawe du ramon, dju nu l'f'rès jamès pus" (Forgive me, Haguète, I swear on the broomstick, I will never do it again). Following the dance by la Haguète, le Hârlikin entered, dressed as bright clowns, and started to dance together in a knife fight.

With the dances complete, the parade began. With only 11,000 people in Malmedy and 2,500 of them in the parade, every onlooker was right at the front and felt drawn into the parade by the different characters.



My favourite were le Long-Né, who walked around in strings of around six, with their hands in white gloves folded behind their backs, the red noses of their masks tilted into the sky and their small pipe leading the way. When the lead Long-Né found a victim, they would start to follow and imitate them in every way, each in turn down the line. Their victim would join into the parade and try to confuse them, walking backwards so the Long-Né couldn't see them, dodging



behind other performers, running into the crowd or dropping to do push ups. Some people seemed oblivious to the imitation, others ended up running laps around the parade trying to escape. They obviously didn't know the key to getting them to stop - buying them a round of drinks. Le Longès-Brèsses were also delightful, with their long arm extensions they would steal a hat from one person and then put it on another.

One gentleman had to constantly walk up to me to regain his hat from my head after le Longès-Brèsses ("long arms") started to pick on him. Le Longès-Brèsses stole Lydia's hat and made her run out into the parade after it. Once she was in the middle la Haguète immobilised her with the hape-tchâr. Seeing her at risk, le Sâvadje Cayèt (a blackface African costume) came and wacked her with a foam rubber club, while other costumes hit her on the head with an inflated pigs bladders and foxes tails. At least the boy with a dead herring on a stick wasn't around at the time.

Nadia got dragged out into the parade for a mobile hair-dressing, she got off lightly compared to the woman who was taken out by the shoe-repairs and had to do a round of the parade in a borrowed gumboot after they stole her shoe (and threw pairs of thongs and old soles at the crowd).

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Le Long-Ramon ("long brooms") walked around with a five metre broom and dusted our heads, especially delighting in surprising those who were watching the parade from windows above. Le Boldjji (bakers) dressed up as a fat baker covered in pretzels walked behind the crowd and used their baking paddles to fondle the bottoms of women "as if they were warm, round loaves of bread from the baking-oven". Le Pièrot dressed up in white fluffy clothes and threw blood oranges and walnuts to us in the crowd. Traditionally when le Pièrot run out they are meant to fall down so that the children can drag them to the cart while singing "Pove Pièrot qui n'a pus dës djèyes!" (Poor Pièrot has no more nuts!)



Language

23/2/09 Leuven

Lydia and I are language impaired. I am learning Dutch and she is learning French, but we only speak English and that is likely to take years to correct. The Australian education system simply doesn't produce multi-lingual people, an hour of Chinese a week when I was 12 and 13 never stood a chance when compared to the multi-language immersion from birth that the Dutch and Scandinavians receive. So far it hasn't been a problem in Belgium. In Flanders, everyone speaks English and nobody minds in the slightest talking to you in your language. The Dutch have survived for years on trading and were always prepared to pick up the trading language and use it - and despite all the dire warnings Dutch has never been threatened as the mother tongue in their homeland. In Brussels and Walloon, the French speakers are less comfortable in English (or even completely incapable), still, nobody takes offense when we speak in English. If we can communicate with a few words and points they are happy to play along, if we can't we both

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smile and shrug and no harm done.

Except this one guy, in Brussels, who approached Lydia with a question in French. She understood the gist but had to reply in English. He switched to English to respond, but when she asked a question in return he said (in perfect English) "I only speak French". I understand the resentment people must feel when English is expected to be understood in non-English countries, and I agree it is a short-coming in English countries that we don't place importance on learning other languages. I understand perfectly well that if he visited Australia or America he would speak English and not expect us to understand French. I understand the particular loss that must be felt by French speakers, as once it was French that was the global language of the elite, and someone could not be anyone in England, Germany or Russia unless they could speak French. I especially understand the irritation that must be felt in France, since their neighbours across the channel never bothered to learn French but expect to be understood in English - to someone just trying to live their life in Paris the influx of English-only speaking tourists could be a torment.

But, rude sir, you do not live in France, you live in tri-lingual Belgium, rift by language wars after forced language imperialism. And in short, that means you were just an arrogant jerk to my wife. I would love to speak French but I can't - the kid of low income parents in Australia just doesn't get that opportunity. I'm not even learning French, since I work in a Flemish institution and one language at a time is hard enough. But let's be clear - I don't expect you to speak English, I only use it because it is our only opportunity for communication. If you don't speak English I chide myself for not speaking French. Yet I am fairly certain you don't speak Flemish or German, since very few French Belgians do. You are living in an officially bilingual city (only because of relatively recent influx of French into a historically Flemish city), the person down the street to you may be Flemish and have family stretching back far longer than yours. Yet you almost certainly didn't learn Flemish to talk to your fellow commune members or German to talk to fellow citizens - most French Belgians learn English as a second language because it is more practical than Flemish or German, and few learn a third language. So if you expect your fellow Flemish and German-speaking citizens to either learn your language or English, you don't really have a leg to stand on when snubbing someone simply for the sin of not speaking French. In fact, you are guilty of the very crime you rail against.

To everyone else in Belgium - thank you for being so kind and understanding to us while we learn your languages. If you knew English you acted like it wasn't a problem to switch languages. If you didn't know English you were still successful in communicating your best wishes to us, no harm done. More than most people, you understand that language competency is more a function of where you were born than any deliberate choice. Hopefully one day we will be able to express our gratitude in your native tongue.

Carnival

24/2/09 Binche

Binche is not the type of town that would normally attract many visitors. An ordinary looking town of 30,000 in French Belgium, once a year it explodes into life for Carnival. The Carnival festivities in Binche are so historic and particular that they are listed by World Heritage as one of the few "[Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity](#)". For at least 500 years,

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and probably longer, the people of Binche have had an elaborate lead up during the 49 days of Lent preceding Shrove Tuesday, with different rituals dictated for each week.



Shrove Tuesday is the main event. Lydia, Shen, Nadia and I got off the train at the imposing station and followed the flood of people to the town centre.

As we walked the Gilles started to enter the streets. The Gilles are local men who dress up in a costume similar to an orange and black jester's outfit, with an enormous ostrich feather head-dress. Ahead of each Gilles was a drum beater, who announced his approach to allow the crowd to follow him, as he threw out small blood oranges. Unlike [Cwarme](#), this was not a jesting event, the Gilles was solemn, never smiling and never taking his eyes off the route to the centre. The Gilles would come out of houses or shops and join the march, and the crowd floated to the parade.

Along the main route thousands upon thousands of people had gathered. We got good positions, about five rows back but standing on the rise of the gutter, so that we had a good view. Lead by police on horses, the first group of Gilles approached, just little

boys who could barely throw their oranges over the fences.

They all wore the same costume and all shuffled the same odd, slow and serious dance as they very slowly progressed through the streets. Between batches of parade, the non-Gilles townfolk walked in procession, not dressed up, just filling the gaps, supplying music and refilling baskets of oranges. There were then three non-Gilles groups, the Harlequin, the Peasants and the Pierrots, each throwing oranges. After that were more and more Gilles, over a thousand of them, separated by age group and each throwing oranges. The teenage Gilles of course tried to look nonchalant and disinterested, but could not hide their glee at pitching oranges as hard as they could at the crowd. You had to watch in all directions as an orange could hurtle from anywhere, I even got a sharp thud in the back of my head as an orange bounced off a building and hit me on the recoil.

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One guy getting a shoulder ride from his friends was targeted with a hundred oranges until he finally fell off under the pressure, we realised pretty soon why all the buildings on the main streets had window shutters stronger than we have seen anywhere else in Belgium. The older Gilles did not try to punish with their gifts, but you still had to watch out as blood

oranges flew towards you.

It was strange, a slow repetitive shuffle, only one costume and just the throwing of oranges, yet it became exhilarating, the thrill of trying to catch as many oranges as you could (together we caught 30), being part of the crowd surge and trying to avoid being hit.

On top of the carillon

26/2/09 Leuven

In the tower above the university library lie 63 bells. The carillon, the only musical instrument that is also a building, was first built in Flanders, in around 1500. Within a hundred years it became iconic of the region, every city of note in the region had its own bell tower and the daily playing of the carillon became a prominent aspect of Flemish life. Our carillonner tonight was An Lommelen, who played for us a forty five minute recital, high up above the city and surrounded by bells.



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The Australian Embassy

27/2/09 Brussels

We spent our Friday night having drinks at the Australian Embassy. I read somewhere that there are about 1000 Australians living in Belgium - about 5% showed up to have drinks. True Belgians would have been appalled at the way we drank the beer directly out of the bottles. We also got to comment on the lack of fresh milk in Belgium - 96.7% of all milk drunk in Belgium is UHT.

Since we were in the Australian embassy I thought I would pass on this [very appropriate advice](#) the Australian government has for those rare tourists intrepid enough to reach the shores of Flanders.

"When you are in Belgium, be aware that local laws and penalties, including ones that appear harsh by Australian standards, do apply to you."

"We advise you to exercise caution and monitor developments that might affect your safety in Belgium because of the risk of terrorist attack."

"Demonstrations frequently occur in Brussels, often aimed at Embassies, the European Union and NATO. You should monitor the media and other local information sources for information about possible demonstrations and avoid relevant areas. These protests can be large and can occasionally turn violent."

"Australians are advised to maintain a safe and legal distance when observing wildlife, including marine animals and birds."

Yes Ambassador, I am mocking you. We have to be so worried about the harsh laws, terrorism, violent demonstrations and the local wildlife in Belgium. Seriously? The wildlife? The three most venomous snakes in the world are common in Australia, and yet we have to be worried about local *birds* in Belgium? Are we meant to be wary of the Northern Shoveler, the Black Woodpecker or the Pochard? Good grief, no wonder nobody reads this rubbish.

The cost of living in Belgium

28/2/09 Leuven

Lydia and I were chatting on the train about how the cost of living was so much cheaper here in Belgium than it was in the US, when Nadia looked up and questioned us in surprise "but I've always heard that the cost of living was cheaper in the US!". It is an interesting question, which place has a cheaper cost of living? As we were discussing it I think it came down to - it depends.

It depends on who you are, your job, your personal context. If you are on the bottom of the heap, better by far to be in Belgium, if you are on top of the heap you'll have more wealth and power in the US than you could ever aspire to in Belgium. Taxes are higher in Belgium, but you get a lot more out of them - I find it mystifying when Americans vote for a larger initial paycheck but then have to spend 17% of their income, on average, on private health care and a whole lot more

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on education. I guess if you are very young, a student or have children, if you are sick or elderly, your lifestyle will generally be better in Belgium than it would be in the US. While if you are young, already educated, employed in a good job, healthy and have no children, well then the extra money that gets taken out of your pay in Belgium isn't an immediate benefit to you.

But it also depends on what constitutes quality of life to you. For Lydia and I, it seemed without question that we could have a better quality of life in Belgium for a lower cost than it would take in America. Good food, beautiful buildings, an apartment in the city centre facing historic buildings, respect for work-life balance, great public transport, personal safety and amazing opportunities for travel. Oh, and that [extra year of life](#) is nice too. But looking deeper, that assessment is based on the things we find important. Different priorities would provide a different analysis. If someone truly valued a big car, cheap gas and junkfood, the McMansion and new DVDs and gadgets every week, well then they would not be wrong if they contended that it is cheaper to have a better lifestyle in America.

Het Groot Begijnhof

1/3/09 Leuven

We had a very pleasant wander around Leuven today, accompanied by friends. We started at Renee, a statue built to represent the female students of Leuven, just outside Sint Michielskerk, a baroque church designed in 1650 by the Jesuit Priest Willem Hessius. We then wandered down to Geluksbrenger (Good luck), a statue of a duck with instructions of how to trick people into thinking the water is activated by rubbing the tail when there is actually a secret button to push.

The Groot Begijnhof is a World Heritage listed city within a city. It was founded in 1230 and includes 62 houses, ten convents and a church, all designed to look inwards rather than to be connected to the rest of the city. Begijnhofs rose in popularity throughout the low countries during this period, due to "a surplus of women" (actually due to a shortage of men because of war combined with a social structure that made it almost impossible for women to support themselves).

Many of the "surplus" women joined convents, but the strict rules (and probably more importantly - the high cost of admission) required the formation of a semi-religious institution where women (the begijns) could live as part of a separate community but still have access to the greater economic activity of the town. The Begijnhof complex is still amazingly intact, and was taken over by the Welfare Commission in 1925 (except for the Gothic



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Church, built in 1305) and restored for student and academic housing.

After het Groot Begijnhof we walked to the Leuven Botanic Gardens via a large statue of Sylvain Van de Weyer, a leading Leuven-born politician during following the Belgian Revolution in 1830. He was selected as foreigner representative of the revolutionaries because of his excellent English, a skill which is now mundane in Leuven. We only had a brief walk through the botanic gardens, but the hidden statues and bright colours made us promise to return. We finished by the statue De Kotmadam, in honour of the landladies of student accommodation.

The smell of Leuven

3/3/09 Leuven

I love standing at my bus stop outside a bakery in the morning. One moment I'll be watching the statue of a small cat on the chimney of the building across the road, lost in thought while waiting for the bus to arrive. The next second the bakery will open its doors for the first time of the day and a flood of smell will rush out, the simply perfect odor of freshly baked bread, with the smells of risen yeast and baked fruit being carried to my nose on a puff of warm air. How lucky we are to live in a city that smells so sweet.

The adoration of the mystic lamb

4/3/09 Gent

I had to go to Gent University for a meeting, so afterwards Lydia and I took the opportunity to visit the Saint Bavo Cathedral. The Cathedral was consecrated in 942, expanded in 1038 in Romanesque style and again in 1569 in Gothic style. The Cathedral is impressive in its stunning size, it is staggering to think of how people were able to build such high and elegant walls a thousand years ago. The power the Church must have had to be able to conscript the labour and wealth required to build it - and the power such a building would give over people who were themselves living in poverty in wooden huts.

We were in Saint Bravo Cathedral to see the [Adoration of the Mystic Lamb](#). The painting is a large polyptych panel painting, completed in 1432, and is considered to be one of the best surviving artworks of early Dutch style. It was painted by Hubert van Eyck and Jan van Eyck, and paid for by the wealthy merchant Joost Vijdt and his wife Lysbette Borluut. The painting is lucky to have survived - many other artworks in the Cathedral were destroyed in the Belgian Iconoclasm, Emperor Joseph II insisted on replacing two panels that included nudity (they have since been put back), the painting was taken by the French during the French Revolution and by the Germans during WWII, and one panel was stolen in 1934 and has never been found. The painting was impressive in its detail - every ripple of the robe and detail of jewelry had painstakingly been reproduced; painfully symbolic in the way Christian paintings typically are; and slightly sickening in the social values it represents, with purity coming from drinking the blood of an innocent lamb and women being judged by their sexual status. What interested me most was the painting of Joost Vijdt, the donor of the alterpiece. The painter captured every facial flaw, the raised veins on his hands and also the selfrightous smug look of fake piety which screamed out "I am a ruthless prick who extorted wealth from the poor, but I am rich enough to

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buy my own version of posterity and hubristic enough to have myself featured on a painting meant to extol humility".

Common names

6/3/09 Leuven

It is interesting that the names that I once found so common are now so rare, while rare names can be exceedingly common. There are 48 "Gerts" where I work, and not a single "Luke".

Decisions, decisions

7/3/09 Brussels

Another pleasant day in Brussels, house hunting. We found another excellent apartment, this one near the central station. It is more expensive, but it also has more room and a well designed kitchen and bathroom. The low town around central station is quite touristy, but the small streets surrounding the touristy core are gorgeous and full of interesting nooks and stores. So hard to choose:



The south station apartment has a stunning view over the old fortifications and is across the road from a small park. The central station apartment has an ordinary view and is several blocks from the nearest park. The south station apartment needs a complete remodel of the kitchen and bathroom, and even then it won't be ideal due to the limiting room. The central station apartment has an excellent bathroom and kitchen, but is on the fourth floor and has no lift. The south station area has no tourists and yet is full of nice cafes and shops. The central station area is full of

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tourists but also interesting and will cut 15 minutes off my daily round-trip commute. Which is best?

Also, while walking around the low town we came across a very short parade consisting of a brass band followed by a gaggle of people dressed up in blackface and holding giant kitchen implements. What is it with Belgians and blackface? Arriving back in Leuven, the train station had been turned into a fun-fair and a parade was on going. How I love living in Belgium...

Golden public health

7/3/09 Leuven

Having had public health care in Australia and private health care in America, the public health care system in Belgium outstrips them both. Of course visits to the doctor or hospital are covered, along with medication, but the health care system here goes out of its way to compassionately help people in need.

Among those "extra touches" covered or partially covered by public health care in Belgium:

- massages for pregnant women
- accommodation for relatives or friends that have to move to be near you while you are in hospital
- assistance around the home for those who require help due to a medical condition
- having someone join you and hold your hand if you have an abortion
- chiropractise and acupuncture
- home minders for sick children

Not bad, hey? I'm less impressed by their 50% coverage of homeopathy products, I hardly see why the government should support quacks selling expensive water, nor do I think the government should imply that homeopathy works by including it within the public health system.

By the sea

13/3/09 Blankenburg

We had a conference at Blankenberge, a seaside resort town on the coast of West Flanders. It feels 10 000 miles from the beaches of Adelaide (while it is, in fact, only 9964.4 miles away). The beach is meant to have sand too hot to walk along in comfort, the harsh sun is meant to burn away your sunscreen and sear into your eyes, the only relief coming from plunging into the clear water which is deceptively cool, resulting in the painful sunburn of the day after. Instead in Blankenberge the sky was grey, it was freezing cold and softly raining. No one in their right mind would bother going to walk along the small gray beach, wrapped up against the cold of the wind, just to look out onto the cold grey ocean. At least the squawk of seagulls in the morning was a touch of the familiar...

Medical examinations

17/3/09 Leuven

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Here is something that I dislike about Belgian work culture - the compulsory medical examinations for employees. I don't like going to the doctor, I find it invasive and irritating, but I strenuously object to going to the doctor for reasons other than my own health. Why should an employer have any right to invade my personal privacy, through the proxy of a doctor? When I asked my doctor about this (or actually, I should call her my employer's doctor, rather than my doctor - which is the entire point of my objection), she said that it is so that she can "confirm that I can do the job I am currently doing". Yes, but the point is that I am currently doing my job, isn't my ability to actually do the job what matters, rather than my BMI or blood pressure? Why should I have to get a medical every year, rather than just assess my actual ability in the job. I don't expect to be kept in my job if I don't perform but I have a perfect health check, so why should I be kicked out my job if I do perform but I have health issues?

From my perspective my health is my business, my job performance is my employers business. Belgian law has fallen onto the wrong side of this ethical divide.

Leaving home (where are my friends?)

21/3/09 Leuven

I have made three major geographical moves now. Adelaide to Canberra (1000km), Canberra to Seattle (13,000km) and Seattle to Leuven (8000km). Each time I have been surprised at how easy it is to pack up and leave everything behind, and how rapidly you can achieve a state of normality in your new home (just a day or two). Yet at the same time, each time I am surprised at how emotionally draining it can be in the months that follow the move, with your friends now so far away. Finding new people to spend time with is difficult, everyone has their own group of friends already and you are busy investing time into your work and the more mundane aspects of settling in. I have been lucky to have worked with some of the most wonderful people I know, getting life changing friendships from my colleagues, but I also feel ashamed when I move at how few friendships I made outside of work in my new city. Even with the best of people, it takes time before you reach the comfortable stage in a friendship where you can just sit near them and have a beer and a casual chat, and that time can take a heavy toll.

I wish my friends were here with me in my new home.

Carnaval de la Laetare des Blancs-Moussis

23/3/09 Stavelot

We had a wonderful day in Stavelot, experiencing Carnaval de la Laetare des Blancs-Moussis. The festival dates back to the 1502, when the Prince-Abbott of Stavelot banned clergy from attending the popular Laetare festival. The towns folk, in support of the clergy, dressed up in white robes and masks (the "Blancs Moussis"), giving a unique flavour to the Laetare festival in Stavelot. Lydia and I took James, Colette and their kids to experience their first festival in Belgium, and also their first taste of the beautiful villages and countryside in Walloon.

The Blancs Moussis were strangely disturbing, the silent marching and blank features being reminiscent of the more esoteric variety of nightmare. After the main parade though the Blancs Moussis shed their serious walk and started throwing confetti at everyone and hitting them on the

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head with inflated pig's bladders and the odd dried herring. With lots of cheap beer, confetti being blown out of a cannon, pig's bladders and our own confetti fight, the day was an enormous amount of fun.



Smurfs

25/3/09 Leuven

Many people know that the Smurfs are Belgian, created by Pierre Culliford in 1958. Fewer people, however, may realise just how Belgian the Smurfs are. In 1972, while Papa Smurf was busy, the Smurf village was divided into North and South due to a cultural/language divide. The division was based on the proper use of the word "smurf", with the Northern Smurfs using "smurf" as a verb (calling a bottle opener a "bottle smurfer") and the Southern Smurfs using "smurf" as a noun (calling it a "smurf opener"). The divide grew so heated, with arguments and protest marches, that the villagers ended up going to war, and it was only the respect both had for Papa Smurf that eventually reunited the village as one.



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Protests

26/3/09 Leuven

There is going to be an ugly little protest march today in Leuven, pro-fascism pro-racism, and a protest march to protest the protest (anti-fascism anti-racism). It is a big let down that these ugly viscous fascists manage to find enough like-minded thugs to be able to hold a protest rally in a town like Leuven. If anyone should have learnt where this right-wing extremist rubbish leads it is Europe. We shouldn't stop their right to free expression, but society should slam itself shut tight against these extremists so that they are pressured into just keeping their bigoted little ideas to themselves, rather than giving them airplay and dignity that they don't deserve.

Seriously strange

27/3/09 Leuven

It was seriously strange last night to see our tiny little street sealed off by police in riot gear. To watch from the balcony as the police, wearing kevlar and holding perspex shields and batons, form a human shield to cut off the traffic while the thugs chanted and yelled. To see the riot police breakup and jump into their armoured van and speed off to the next location. To see the screaming skinheads being escorted by a row of silent armed guards to make sure none acted upon the hate speech they were spouting.

Law in Belgium

2/4/09 Leuven

I have often wondered how law works in bilingual countries. In Belgium, all laws are legal in both French and Dutch. For example, the law allowing same sex marriage is paragraph one of article 143 of the Belgian Civil Code (Book I, Title V, Chapter I). It is both *Een huwelijk kan worden aangegaan door twee personen van verschillend of van hetzelfde geslacht* (Dutch) and *Deux personnes de sexe différent ou de même sexe peuvent contracter mariage* (French). It is obviously highly desirable for the law to be legal in both languages, but I don't understand how they overcome the practical difficulties. Surely there are many words in French and Dutch for which there is an approximate translation but no exact translation. It is hard enough when law is in a single language and every word and comma gets parsed endlessly, exactly what "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" means is unclear. So surely if the law is legal in two languages sometimes cases will come up in the gray area where an action appears to be legal under one version of the law but not under another?

A trip to Antwerp

4/4/09 Antwerp

The first thing you notice when entering Antwerp is the beautiful train station, which must be the most elegant I have ever seen. When the train is



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pulling up to the platforms it is modern and trendy, all blue lighting and smooth steel. Then you step out of the train and the platforms are covered by an enormous old iron frame and the station itself is a thing of beauty. Built in 1895, the high dome and attention to detail reflect the values of a time when public services were granted respect and even reverence, a seemingly impossible opening up of the world to all who chose to see it. Walking down the main stairwell to the ticket office you are dazzled by the grace and elegance of the marble stonework, decadent but tasteful. Outside the train station the main square was taken up by an inflatable monster, which appears to be doing the rounds of Europe, chained up for adventures to explore its innards.

Our morning at Antwerp was reserved to visit Antwerp Zoo, one of the oldest zoos in the world (built in 1843). We spent most of our time in the zoo watching the elephants. There are four elephants in the exhibit (Lydia is eagerly anticipating the [fifth elephant](#)), three



mature Indian elephants and one juvenile. While we were there the juvenile was frolicking in the water, diving under the surface and appearing to try to do handstands, with only its bum and tail sticking up, splashing its trunk along the surface to make splashes and generally jumping around. When it saw its mother standing by the water it ran out and tried spraying her with its trunk, that didn't work so it ran back to the water and started to stamp its hind foot to make splashes in the water.

After still being ignored it got out and started to push its mother into the water. Giving up with a sign of weariness, the mother entered into the water and started showing the baby how splashes are meant to be made, while the baby tried to climb on top of its back and generally ignore the concept of personal space. Finally the big male strode into the water, and calmly bathed without fuss by the other two elephants. Finally clean, the mother strode out of the water, ignoring the baby's efforts to run around and push it back it, accompanied with high pitched chirps. The other adult had spent the

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entire time trying to get treats from a feeding toy, but when the big male emerged from the water and let out low pitched rumbles all the elephants got together, formed a circle and started to throw dirt onto their backs. The juvenile wasn't very good at it and kept on getting dirt in its eye, and even had to sit down and have a rest half way through.

After the zoo Lydia's friend Di met us and took us back to her place for a delicious lunch, then proceeded to take us on a tour of this oh-so-lovely city. We walked past old cathedrals and tiny alleyways to the town square, where a tall statue (the Brabo fountain, built in 1887) shows the mythological origin of the name "Antwerp". According the legend, a giant called Antigoon lived near the river Scheldt. He extorted a toll from those crossing the river at the city, and those who refused had a hand severed by the giant and thrown into the river. The giant was slain by the hero Brabo, who cut off the giants hand and through it into the river, and thus the city is called "hand werpen" ("throwing the hand"). Today a gaggle of school girls were perched up on the statue giggling at those below. We also walked to the old castle on the port, with a statue of a water spirit visiting local drunks, and walked through the shoemakers alley. A really enjoyable taste of a remarkable city.



The Ugly City

5/4/09 Brussels

"If you think that I hate Brussels I don't, it is because I love Brussels that I am so disappointed in it".

That is how our guide finished up our tour of Brussels today. It was a tour with a difference. Instead of taking us to all the beautiful parts of Brussels (of which there are many - I really love the city), he took us on a tour of the scars of Brussels. We wandered around the backstreets made ugly by parking garages and went out of our way to see horrible post-modernist buildings. In beautiful squares we talked about the one ugly building, or if there were none the missed opportunities for footpath cafes. We walked along Nieuwstraat, the Mayfair of the Belgian

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Monopoly board, and our guide told us how it had once been a flourishing mixed residential/retail street but the success brought in the franchises and pushed out both the small businesses and the residential area, now leaving it dead once the shops close.



Even in the most visually stunning areas around the Grand Place our guide pointed out beautiful buildings that were not actually original and were rebuilt too ornate or beautiful for their intended time-period, such as Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles. In the Raddison Hotel, which contains a fragment of the original medieval wall, he pointed out that they actually knocked it down and moved it three metres for the sake of the restaurant. For a view over the city we visited an ugly car-parking tower on the cover of L' Eveque / Bisschops and Vierge Noire / Zwarte Lievevrouw, with a spectacular view over the city (the guide complained that it was marred by the fence erected to prevent suicides). Our guide even grumped when pointing out an ugly building that was going to be demolished, saying that while it was a horrible eyesore that should never have been built, it was now part of Brussels heritage and they should learn to live with it.

The wonderful thing about the tour, in addition to getting an unvarnished look at the city, was the comradery it induces among the group as we all grinned at each other every time our guide uttered "it is bad here, but just wait until you see what they did around *that* corner..."

From the sound of it, great civic crimes were perpetrated in Brussels in the 60s, when the fad for ugly buildings left a visible scar, but the fad for segregated living (separating retail and working areas from residential areas) left a much deeper, but less visible, scar. Unlike cities like Brugge,

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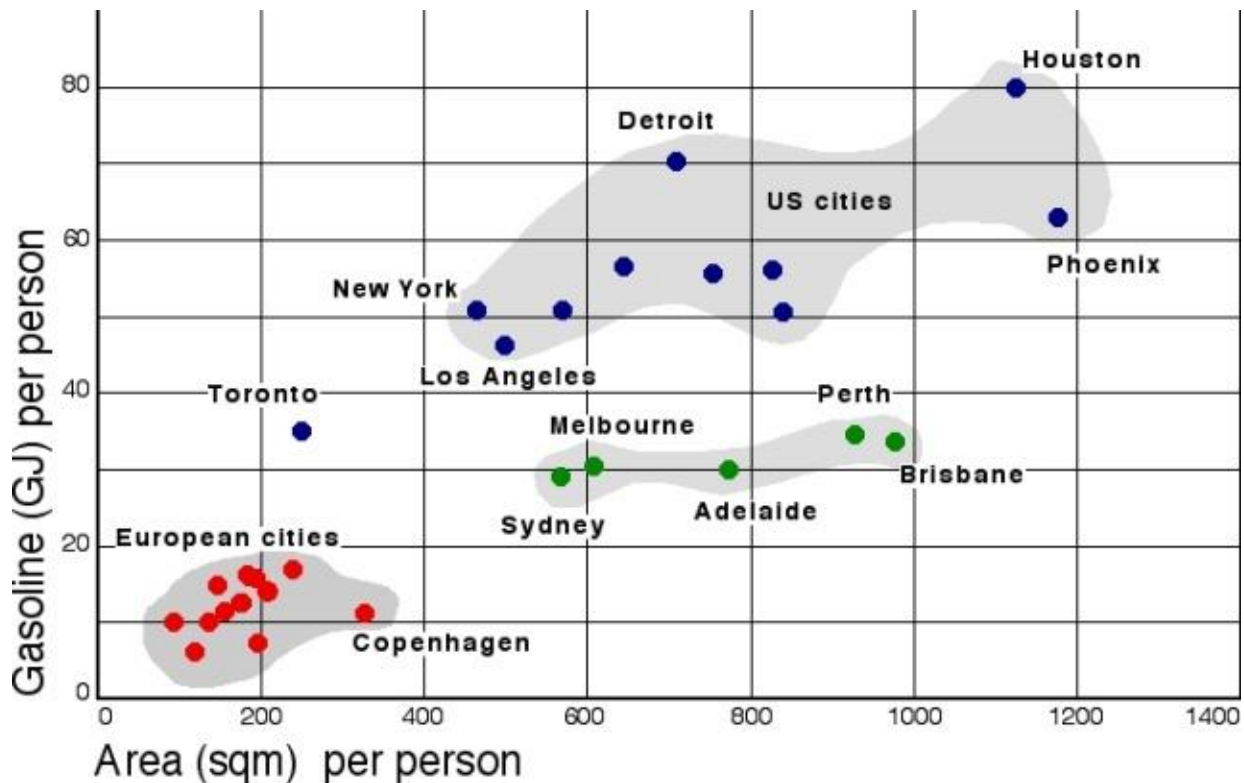
which reached its peak in the 1400s, thus preserving its architecture, Brussels has been continuously growing.

This has left the many beautiful parts of the city somewhat isolated. If you know where to go, you see beautiful buildings, splendid parks, spectacular monuments and ancient statues. If you don't... well you see civic crimes where ugly buildings and bad design have driven out all the people. After today, I now understand how some people can visit Brussels and call it ugly, but I also know that with a little research it is a beautiful, charming and immensely *interesting* city.

Urban planning

6/4/09 Leuven

After the tour of the ugly side of Brussels yesterday, I was browsing sites on urban planning and came across [this](#) interesting graph. It is a little old, but very informative, plotting the population density by the car use for various cities in Europe, North America and Australia. Not surprisingly, European cities are more dense and have lower car use, but I was interested to see that while Australian and American cities were equally low-density, US cities had much greater car use. This might be due to cheaper petrol prices, or it might be an effect of the Lewis-Mogridge position - the more roads that are built, the more traffic there is to fill the roads (the flip side is that closing down roads, such as 42nd Street in New York City in 1990, can actually reduce traffic). For me the best measure of quality life is how little you need a car - if you need a car that means bad city design - the shops, cafes and workplaces are not near where you live.



Life in Belgium

Consumer culture, working culture

7/4/09 Leuven

We were talking to a UK expat the other day who was complaining about the service in Belgium, saying she missed the service from when she was living in America. It surprised me, because the service in America was one thing that really got on my nerves. I was a bartender / waiter during university, and the way I tried to serve is the way I like to be served - polite, efficient and out of the way. I hated it when waiters in America kept on bothering me during the meal, coming over after the first few bites to see if everything is okay, making a fuss about making sure I see them topping up my water after every mouthful, whipping my plate away the second I finished rather than waiting for everyone at the table to finish.

Part of it is the tip culture I guess, the chef is the real star of the meal so waiters just want to hang around your table a lot so it seems like they are giving you more visible "service" to earn that tip. But I think it goes deeper than that. My theory is that American society is geared up around being the king when you are the consumer. The customer is always right, the consumer needs to be treated like royalty, the man with the money calls the shots. The flip side of this is that the same consumer needs to be subservient when in the job, needs to bow down to the consumer and grovel sycophantically. It seems like American society is willing to make this bargain - slave to the dollar during the day, master over it at night. In Australia and Europe though, this deal is rejected. People want to be treated as an equal while working, and in return they don't demand to be treated as anything more when they play. This cultural differences explains not only the service at a restaurant, but also part of the difference in politics between America and Europe - Americans accept bad labour deals in order to get good consumer bargains, putting companies ahead of people, while Europeans demand fair labour deals even if it increases the cost of consumption, treating people as workers before consumers.

A new Spring

10/4/09 Leuven

The sky was bright and clear when we left work, so James and I walked down to the Oude Markt to meet everyone for drinks. The trees lining the side of the road, yesterday twisted skeletons clawing at the sky, were today covered in vibrant green buds, unfurling into the blue sky. Flower beds had bloomed, with tulips rising up in a riot of colour.



Oude Markt was packed full of people, a splendid atmosphere to sit outside, enjoying the sunshine and the beer, reclining in our chairs to appreciate beautiful old buildings and the sparkle of spring.

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Stille Zaterdag

11/4/09 Leuven

On *Stille Zaterdag*, Silent Saturday, Church bells do not ring in Flanders. Children believe they have flown off to Rome in order to bring back Easter eggs and scatter them over the town.

For our Easter Saturday we wandered through the town. We walked through the farmers' market, buying a quiche from our regular quiche man, have the baker pick out a loaf of bread for us and place it in Lydia's trolley, and pick out the fruit and vegetables from farmers with dirt still encrusted on their hands. The flowers were blooming, the town was pretty and we told each other over and over again how lucky we are to be living this life.



Oddly, the Church bells still rang today... does this mean the children will get no eggs tomorrow?

Inside the colleges

12/4/09 Leuven

I thought I knew central Leuven fairly well. I must have walked up every street multiple times. Yet I had no idea of the hidden delights that were within the colleges. On the weekends they are so quite and the private entries make it feel like trespassing, but they are all public property and people are welcome to explore. Walking through the gates of Paus Adriaan VI-college, I was honestly surprised at the beautiful courtyard that opened up in front of me, hidden all this time



behind the bland brick walls that surround it. A pair of modern stylistic lions go surprisingly well with the old buildings that surround the courtyard, and pushing through the building you arrive at an interesting statue of Pieter de Somer, the first lay rector of the university. Van Dalecollege hides a small forest seeded with wildflowers and Atrechtcollege has a functional Chinese astrolabe to track the stars above Beijing. What do the other colleges hide?

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Brussels through the eyes of children

18/4/09 Brussels



Today's exploration of Belgium was Brussels through the eyes of an eight year-old girl. The Grand Place, Manneken Pis, Jeanneke Pis, none of these made much impact. The "echo chamber" in the train station though was an amazing experience. The old castle grounds of Groot-Bijgaarden were interesting, but probably not as good as trying to do hand-stands on the lawns and running

through the flower maze. The prospect of a marionette show just couldn't compete with Mini-Europe, but Mini-Europe itself had to take a back seat to Atomium once she saw people taking a flying fox down from the top ("how do they hang on so long?"). And the best part of Atomium? The elevator where they put white sheets up to make it look really cold (entering the Antarctica exhibit). Mini-Europe was a hit, although the idea that they were all models of real places took awhile to sink in. Once the idea of scale kicked in the most impressive gasp was reserved for a P&O cruiseline. But perhaps the happiest moments of all were singing "I'm bringing home a little bumble bee, won't my mummy be so proud of me" and winning a competition at keeping your hands up in the sky during a long train trip. Or that "statue dog" that only moved its eyes when looking at us passing the window. It is so nice seeing someone experience everything as special.

Showing off Leuven

21/4/09 Leuven

The visit of our dear friends Jeong and Lianne was our first chance to show off this beautiful city in which we now live. It was a wonderful experience to be able to see them again after so long, and to share the sights and stories of our new home. Without letting them rest from their trans-Atlantic flight I marched them past the library, through the colleges, into the Groot Begijnhof and to the Stadhuis. We had hot chocolate melted into



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the milk, Belgian beers and dinner at an excellent restaurant. Most importantly, we got to share it with our friends.

To Maastricht

22/4/09 Maastricht



I took Jeong and Lianne on a day trip to Maastricht, to experience one of the key delights of Belgium - being able to travel across Western Europe at the drop of a hat. Oddly, this experience of travel freedom was briefly challenged at Maastricht train station, where guards checked everyone's passports or European ID cards. I've never had a passport check in internal Schengen zone travel before, I wonder if this is a Maastricht thing, or just a one off?

We spent the day just wandering around, appreciating the beauty of the city. We walked across the bridge over the River Maas and through the winding streets leading to the Markt (where we found an interesting flame-throwing statue to Johannes Petrus Minckelers, the inventor of gas lighting), then down to the Vrijthof. There we climbed up the red tower of Sint Janskerk to look out over the city, and we visited the thousand year old Sint Servaasbasiliek. We wandered back along the old fortifications, now made into a charming park lining the old moat and city walls. We lost Jeong within the Helpoort

(the oldest surviving town gate in the Netherlands, being built in 1229) but made it to the train station in time to meet Lydia in Brussels for chocolate shopping and a spectacular dinner.

The difference sixty years makes

23/4/09 Leuven

From the National Geographic Magazine, May 1948 issue "Belgium Comes Back".

"Everybody works in Belgium - men, women, children, animals. The tempo of city life is brisk.

In the country you will see people going into the fields at dawn, and if, perchance, you return at dusk you will find many of them still there.

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Driving in the country at night is made difficult and hazardous by a procession of carts creaking their way home, heavy-laden, from the fields.

Another thing which strikes the visitor is the number of people with bundles on their backs. Everyone seems to be carrying something; those who aren't will probably be pushing bicycles, carts, or wheelbarrows.

A Belgian will carry anything on a bicycle - boxes, bundles, bales. Once, along the Schelde, I saw a man pedaling over the cobblestones with a barrel between his arms.

In addition to bicycles, three- and even four-wheeled carts are operated by foot power.

Animal power is also used widely in Belgium. Belgian horses are noted for their size and stamina. In addition, dogs are used for pulling carts, and you may even see a dog helping to push his master's cycle. Cows are also used as beasts of burden.

Walking near Namur one afternoon, I was startled to see a procession of hay wagons, four in all, moving majestically down the road behind a power plant consisting of two horses and a cow.

Hard work does not seem to prevent the Belgians from living a full life. They like a good time and, somehow or other, they manage to enjoy themselves."

Sometimes I am just completely thrown back when I realise just how much life has changed within living memory.

Proto-Europe

24/4/09 Leuven

I am reading "The Discovery of France" by Graham Robb at the moment. It is a really interesting book in that it challenges our preconceptions (or at least, my preconceptions) of what Europe was like only 100 years ago.

There was always a sense in my mind that Europe discovered high civilisation centuries ago, with the development of material goods and the written development of scientific thinking beyond that of many other cultures, such as the aboriginal cultures of the Americas and Australia. Working in a university founded in 1425 in a city that has existed since at least 891CE tends to reinforce this image of proto-Europe being just a quaint version of modern Europe. The truth is probably far from this. I hadn't realised that even 200 years ago, many French peasants were living in what amounted to simple caves, the average life expectancy in France was only 40 years and seven months of every year was spent in what essentially amounted to human hibernation. Once the harvest was in farmers would retreat to their hovels and slow down their metabolism by eating little and barely moving for months on end.

The idea that a region like France was even a "nation" 200 years ago is probably naive. Yes, a single king ruled the entire area on paper, but in reality the region was tens of thousands of small family-based villages with no higher organisational structure. Most of the country had no

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practical transportation infrastructure so people generally didn't move, those few who did found no sign of "France". 200 years ago only 11% of the population spoke French, instead many different languages were spoken across the region, French, Occitan, Francoprovençal, Catalan, Corsican Italic, Italian, Flemish, Frankish, Alsatian, Breton, Basque, Shuadit, Zarpatic, Calo and others unrecorded. These languages were further split up into at least 55 major dialects and hundreds of sub-dialects, including a version of French spoken only in whistles in the village of Aas (which only died out 50 years ago). Two or three villages away and peasants would not even be able to talk to each other.

France even had its own caste system, a group of "untouchables" called cagots, who were banned from any work except rope-making and carpentry. It is suspected that this caste was created by a royal proclamation against the carpenters guild before 1000 CE. What is known is that while they could even become rich, they could never leave their caste or interact with non-cagots. A cagot in Moumour who tried to become a farmer had his feet pierced with iron spikes, cagots were forced to live in separate communities until at least the late 1800s and persecution of cagots continued in places well into the 1900s. Even today, the descendents of cagots are more likely to be carpenters and to intermarry within their community.

I am starting to realise that the high civilisation of Europe over the last thousand years was not due to an advanced level of civilisation among the population. It is only because Europe was fertile enough that a population density was achieved where a few rich cosmopolitan centres could form. The cultural and scientific advances they made over a thousand years only became accessible to the broader European population over the last 100-200 years. The staggering buildings we see that are 500 to 1000 years old are the exceptions that survive, the lives of the masses were lived in hovels that were never to be preserved.

If the human population has been undergoing a slow increase in cultural knowledge, this mostly happened at the level of rich elites in high density areas, with the bulk of humanity living no better than in Roman times until 200 years ago. America's aboriginal civilisations lost the signs of high culture (material goods and written scientific advancement) when the high density populations crashed. Australia was never fertile enough to allow this density level to be reached, pushing cultural progression towards non-material non-written forms. Even Europe hardly made a steady progression - the Dark Ages were only dark for Europe, Asia and the Middle East were hundreds of years more advanced, and in a very real way Europe only became the world coloniser because when it made its next cultural leap from the back of Middle Eastern knowledge, culture tipped over the threshold into the industrial age.

To Liege

25/4/09 Liege

We spent the day today in Liege, once the capital of the highly religious prince-bishopric (985 CE to 1794 CE), then a booming industrial town, and now a heavily socialist French city, struggling to come to grips with the post-industrial age. Our tour guide was blunt: "You are lucky to be coming here today, not five years ago. Liege has beautiful buildings but it was a dump. It has high unemployment and in 2001 had Europe's highest crime rate. It just looked like crap. But over the past five years the government has started to clean up and restore the city

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centre, so you can see the beautiful buildings again."

Actually, I quite liked Liege. It certainly has its ugly parts, large decaying steel works and lumbering industrial complexes, and even the old buildings tended to be covered in a layer of soot and grime. But the city had character, the Palais des Princes Eveques (the Prince-Bishops Palace) was nicely set out in the centre of the town, interesting museums and buildings were abundant, and the 373 steps up the Montagne de Bueren tempted us to view the city out over the cathedral. Liege also has a uniqueness about its culture, such as its love of the rebellious puppets Tchantchès and Nânesse. Lydia was an especial fan of the cute puppies of Liege.



Atheists and swine flu

6/5/09 Leuven

The religious like to say "There are no atheists in foxholes", despite the [countless atheists](#) who fought and died in wars, or who survived through the horrors of the fox hole to stand up afterwards and say they never backed down or sought refuge in faith. Perhaps the saying needs to be updated now that swine flu causes more panic than war. Staunchly Catholic Mexico has [closed down mass](#) in its churches for the first time in hundreds of years. "Of course", they say, "we can't go to Church with swine flu around, a single parishioner could spread to it thousands if they are packed into a Church", not noticing the monumental shift from faith to science that this statement encompasses. Father Jose Camarena is organising home visits for sick families - and his advice: "I say to them: [go drink a bottle of tequila](#), it may not cure the flu but it'll help you forget". When push comes to shove, people are choosing scientific advice over religious practice. Perhaps the new saying should be "There is no faith during swine flu".

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Drivers license

6/5/09 Leuven

My last piece of business with town hall is now complete - I am now the proud owner of a Belgian drivers license.

This one was the ordeal, first I had to get Belgian residency (which was made easier by my EU citizenship) and then I had to physically swap my Australian drivers license for a Belgian one - if I ever want my Australian license back I need to return the Belgian license. Problems then arose because I am in Belgium on my UK citizenship but my drivers license is Australian, so I had to prove that I lived in Australia for at least two years before getting my Australian license. Academic transcripts from university served that purpose, but had to be confirmed by the Belgian police. Then the problem was that ACT drivers licenses don't have an issue date, just an expiry date. I would have thought that having a valid unexpired license was more important than the date of issue, but no, I needed an issue date. A letter for the ACT Registration Office was rejected on the grounds that it wasn't legalised, but today (on my sixth visit) I cleared up the unresolved paperwork and I have it!

I was a little mystified when she pushed a large sheet of pink paper towards me.

"What is this for?" I asked.

"That's your drivers license".

"Really?"

She ruefully chuckled, "Yes, it would be nice to have plastic cards that fit in your wallet, but we don't have them yet in Belgium."

A day in Cologne

9/5/09 Cologne

Just two hours on the Thalys from Brussels and you are in Cologne. We had a very pleasant day walking around. Of course we visited the Kölner Dom, the imposing cathedral just outside the train station that dominates the city. It is the largest cathedral in Germany (144.5 metres long, 86.5m wide and 157m tall) and took 600 years to build (from 1248-1880). The soot-encrusted Gothic spires survived WWII as the Allies deliberately left it standing as a navigation landmark for bomber flights.



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We had a leisurely walk through the city, nipping into a couple of shops to look around. We particularly liked the Lego store, which in addition to the regular kits had a candy bar-style section with different style pieces that you could scoop out and buy by the cup. As a nice touch they had a section with different hats, heads and bodies so that you could pick the Lego people you really wanted. We visited the sobering EL-DE House, once the scene of Gestapo torture cells and now a museum and memorial, and the polar opposite museum in the form of the Schokoladen Museum dedicated to chocolate.

The Kattenbelletje

10/5/09 Ypres

The weather on Sunday was perfect for Belgian festivals, both modern and historic. We briefly popped into Brussels to see the World's Largest Tintin Comic Page at the Grand Place, which was indeed large but didn't actually appear to feature Tintin. We then moved on to Ypres, a town most famous for having been obliterated during three major battles in World War I where a million people were killed, but once every three years famous for the Kattenbelletje.



Lydia was very approving of the pro-cat orientation of the city, which is beautifully built from old stone (all restored with money from Germany's WWI reparations). We had grandstand tickets at the start of the parade and waved our cat flags as the first wave of children dressed up as cats in suits and bowler hats welcomed us to the 42nd Kattenstoet. "Cat Veneration in



History" came next, the Egyptian Cats and Celtic Cats were ho-hum, but the Mediaeval Tomcat was fantastic - a giant daemonic cat head with cats hanging down and eating the eyeballs as drums, accompanied by fire-breathers (the fire-breather very noticeably wiped his chest dry each time before breathing fire, and just as noticeably had no chest hair - once bitten twice shy?).

The historic section of the parade followed. Soldiers escorted a float

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with a rich priest blessing the crowd, until a bunch of poor peasants rushed the podium, grabbed spears from the soldiers and stabbed the priest. They were in turn over-powered and beaten back into subjugation, a re-enactment of the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566. The Walls of Ypres were then built according to the 1678 orders of Louis XIV and Ypres became a city of peace following WWI.

Next were the floats of the Cat in Language and Legend. Puss in Boots was familiar to us, but the floats re-enacting Flemish cat sayings went way over our heads. Proverbs don't seem to translate well in mime - "the fur will fly" and "when the cat's away the mice will play" makes sense, but others don't seem to be cat-orientated in English ("being at loggerheads", "being dead meat", "showing your true colours", "many kiss the hand they wish to cut off" and "doing



something forbidden secretly") and some we just didn't understand - "belling the cat", "the funeral of a large cat".

Cats Around the World followed, including Kangaroo cats from Australia, Monkey cats from Africa, the musical "Cats" from England and Garfield from America. Finally Mr Cieper and Mrs Minneke Poes brought up the end of the parade. Crowds gathered at the base of the Cloth Hall as the City Jester appeared and started to throw kittens from the tower to their death below. No longer a practical solution to the excess of cats at the end of winter and the warding off of witches (with success - they threw cats off the belfry for 900 years without any supernatural occurrences in the city), since 1817 it is toy cats being thrown to the crowd roaring for velvet blood below. The traditional witch

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burning afterwards was a bit prolonged for us (listening to the thirty minute trial in Flemish got boring quickly), but the religious hypocrisy of the jury and the emotional distress of which were oddly powerful in a setting where once innocent women really were burnt to death by screaming crowds in a violent religious fervor. At least the estimated 250 women falsely burnt at the stake in Belgium are remembered today in a warning against giving religion power over the population.



Walking in Belgium

11/5/09 Leuven

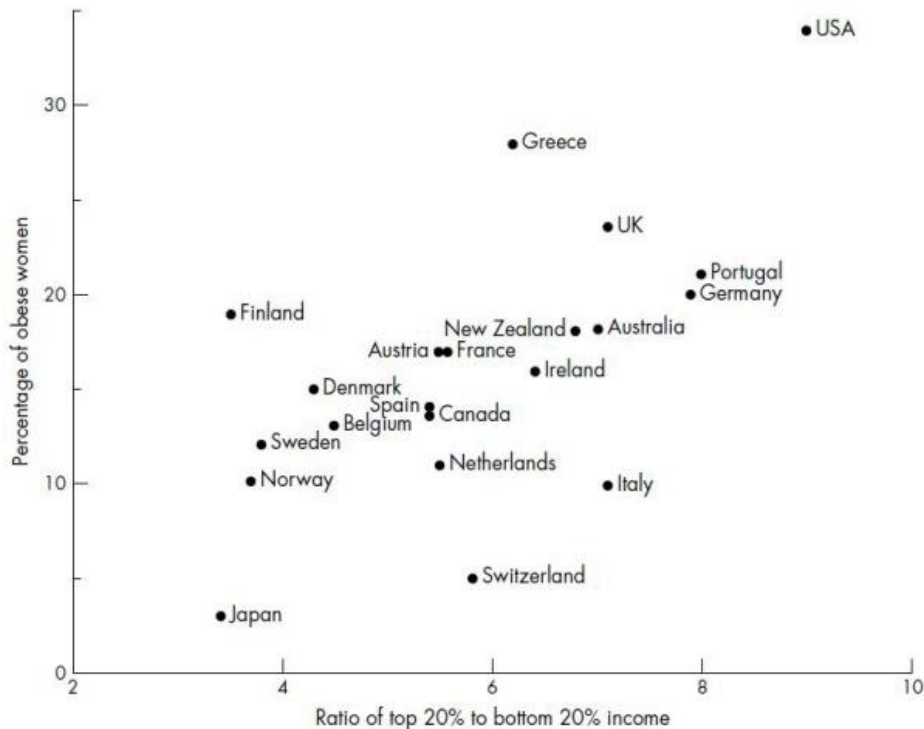
After my last post, in wondering about why obesity in Belgium was so much lower than in America, despite more time spent eating and greater consumption of chocolate, my epidemiologist wife pointed me towards these two papers:

"Wider income gaps, wider waistbands? An ecological study of obesity and income inequality". Pickett et al, Journal of Epidemiological Community Health 2005.

"Walking, Cycling, and Obesity Rates in Europe, North America, and Australia". Bassett et al, Journal of Physical Activity and Health 2008

The first paper makes the point that social inequality is an excellent predictor of, and contributor to, public health. Those countries with lower levels of income disparity between the poorest and the most wealthy are also healthier and thinner countries.

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The second paper measures physical activity as a proportion of trips taken by the average citizen. In the US, 88% of trips are taken by car, 2% by public transport, 1% by bike and 9% by walking. In Australia, 86% of trips are taken by car, 8% by public transport, 1% by bike and 5% by walking. In Belgium, 70% of trips are taken by car, 6% by public transport, 8% by bike and 16% by walking (and Belgium is one of the poor performers in western Europe!).

What really matters though is distance and calories - Americans cycle 40km and walk 141km per year, Australians cycle 136km and walk 419km per year and Belgians cycle 322km and walk 380km per year. That really puts things into perspective - even with the extra chocolate, Belgians are skinnier than Americans because they walk/cycle more than 700km per year (burning 62 Calories per day) compared to 180km per year (burning just 20 Calories per day)! When you eat twice as much chocolate but exercise four times as much you stay skinnier...

Eating chocolate

11/5/09 Leuven

Here are three interesting statistics I came across this weekend:

Average time spent eating

America - 75 minutes per day

Australia - 90 minutes per day

Belgium - 110 minutes per day

Amount of chocolate eaten

America - 5.45kg/year

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Australia - 5.72kg/year
Belgium 8.92kg/year

Amount of obesity

America - 30.6%
Australia - 21.7%
Belgium - 11.7%

Strange, isn't it? Belgians spend more time eating and consume more chocolate than Americans, and yet their obesity rate is far lower (with Australia in between on each metric). It is interesting to think about which aspects of Belgian life are so healthy and which aspects of American life are unhealthy. The latter are easier for me to recognize, after living in Seattle for three years - the [high fructose corn syrup](#) in everything has to negate lower chocolate consumption, and the [urban design](#) in America promotes non-stop car use rather than walking. I wonder what is so healthy about living in Belgium though, and whether I will get any benefit :)

Vegetarian Gent

13/5/09 Leuven

This is [interesting news](#) from Gent:

The Belgian city of Ghent is about to become the first in the world to go vegetarian at least once a week.

Starting this week there will be a regular weekly meatless day, in which civil servants and elected councillors will opt for vegetarian meals.

Ghent means to recognise the impact of livestock on the environment.

The UN says livestock is responsible for nearly one-fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions, hence Ghent's declaration of a weekly "veggie day".

Public officials and politicians will be the first to give up meat for a day.

Schoolchildren will follow suit with their own veggiedag in September.

It is hoped the move will cut Ghent's environmental footprint and help tackle obesity.

Around 90,000 so-called "veggie street maps" are now being printed to help people find the city's vegetarian eateries.

Microfinance

16/5/09 Leuven

In honour of the first community raising \$500 000 in microfinance funding at [Kiva](#) I thought I would spruik their good work at TravBuddy. Support local communities through sustainable

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tourism when you can travel, and through microfinancing when you can't.

Of course it helps that the relative [community funding rankings](#) are so interesting. Which philosophical community has raised the most money? Atheists and Agnostics(#1), with Christians (#2) a distant second (Mormons are at #33 with Flying Spaghetti Monster supporters close behind at #34 and ahead of the Catholics at #35). Which political community has raised the most money? Team Obama (#3), with the conservatives at #58 and Capitalists at #98. Which advocacy community has raised the most money? Gay, lesbian and friends (#9), far ahead of wind power supporters (#83) with the anti-choice brigade down at #86 (but at least they are beating "Cats are people too" at #87). Which geographical community has raised the most money? Europe (#4), Australia (#6) and Belgium(#8)! (USA is at #32).

To Paris for the day

23/5/09 Paris

A young friend of our who recently moved to Belgium was telling us that she had always dreamed of going to Paris and hoped that one day she would get to go. "Well would you like to come with us? We are going there Saturday." Just like that we can hop on a train, and an hour and a half after leaving Brussels we are in central Paris and a young girl's dreams come true. The Eiffel Tower is a must - who could resist a stylish building which was the [tallest in the world](#) for 41 years and required Gustov Eiffel to revolutionise the science of metallurgy in order to build? We visited some disappointing flea markets and were unable to enter the Catacombs of Paris due to the enormous lines, but quality crepes and Notre Dame more than made up for it. A cruise along the Siene, walking up the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, climbing the Arc de Triomphe and watching sunset at the Louve pyramids and our whirl-wind day trip was complete.



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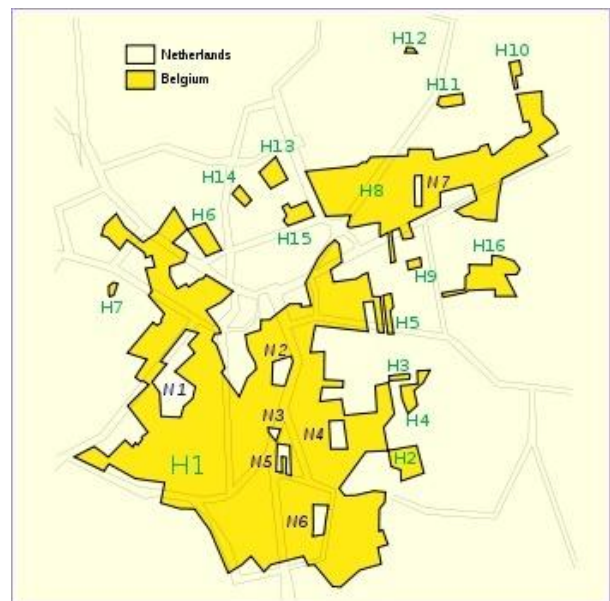
Belgian exclaves

24/5/09 Baarle-Hertog

We thought we would spend the glorious Belgian spring day in the small town of Baarle-Hertog with our dear friends visiting from Cambridge, Michelle and Grant. Of course, if you are going to visit Baarle-Hertog, you have to visit Baarle-Nassau. And I don't mean that in the "oh, it would be a real shame to visit Baarle-Hertog and not visit Baarle Nassau" type of way - it is *physically impossible* to visit Baarle-Hertog without visiting Baarle-Nassau. You see, this town has the most complicated international border in the world. Baarle-Hertog is a set of 24 Belgian exclaves, each of which is also a Netherlands enclave. To make matters more complicated, Baarle-Nassau doesn't just surround the 24 Belgian exclaves, it is also made up of seven Netherlands exclaves, each of which are Belgian enclaves by virtue of being within the Belgian exclaves of Baarle-Hertog.

Complicated? I need a map to explain.

Why is the border so screwed up? Basically this is the way all of Europe used to look. Feudalism cut and spliced Europe into tiny land fragments, all for sale to the richest bastard or free to conquest by a bigger bastard with a sword. Land was divided by sale or between sons during generational change, fused by marriages or purchases, gained or lost for arcane rights and taxation. Baarle was no different in being divided up between the Dukes of Brabant ("Hertog") and the House of Nassau. What was different about Baarle is just how long the messed up situation has lasted. After the Belgian Protestants revolted against Spanish control of the Habsburg Netherlands in 1568, the Eighty Years' War began.



The Protestants were rapidly pushed north (ironically out of Belgium, where it all started), but the situation soon stabilized along with is now essentially the current Belgian-Netherlands border. Spain refused to acknowledge the de facto independence of the Netherlands for 80 years (until 1648), freezing land claim disputes between the regions. Napoleon reunited the Netherlands and Belgium in 1815 but the union soon collapsed, in 1831, making it important to finally sort out the legal border. The Treaty of Maastricht in 1843

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sorted out the border except for Baarle, which was complicated by the feudal owners now being divided by the new border. Eventually, in 1974, the enclave/exclave situation was agreed upon by both Belgium and the Netherlands, but it wasn't until 1995 that a thorough analysis of the historical documents combined with GPS mapping made the official borders final (with a fair bit of shifting between 1974 and 1995 as the data became more accurate).

Of course, people were living in Baarle the entire time, and houses had been knocked down and rebuilt over the past 500 years, so that today's border has no respect for the town planning. The border runs down streets, across parks and even divides houses and shops. Your bedroom can be in Belgium while your kitchen is in the Netherlands. For taxation and residential purposes, each house is deemed to be in the country in which the front door is located, so there are 2,306 Belgians in Baarle-Hertog and 5,330 Dutch in Baarle-Nassau. Some were surprised in 1995 when the final borders came out and the shift of a couple of metres turned Dutch into Belgians and Belgians into Dutch - the typical response was to change the position of the front door to get back into your old country. This was not merely patriotism - the front door move had serious taxation and regulation effects. A new door could change income and sales tax and even the opening hours of shops.

So what does it mean for a town where a few unsuspecting steps can mean...

Netherland exclaves

24/5/09 Baarle-Nassau

...that you are in a new country?

Well, a lot of services are shared. There is an international library, a joint cultural centre and joint provision of water, gas and sewerage. But a lot of stuff is divided along strict national lines. There are two Town Halls, one for Baarle-Hertog and one for Baarle-Nassau, two fire services (it must be difficult for fire-fighters to keep track of whether a fire is on their side of the border or not), two telephone services and two electricity services. There are even two police services - I hope there is a good extradition treaty! Can you imagine the difficulty in trying to track down a criminal who can run across twenty international borders in ten minutes? Of course, you could just surround the entire exclave and wait until they get bored of living in the same few square metres. Until 1860 there was only a single Church, but then the



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Dutch Bishop of Breda realised that this meant Dutch Catholics were attending a foreign (Belgian) church, so he created a second Church for the Dutch.



One of the most absurd situations is the postal system. If you put a letter in a Baarle-Hertog post-box for a Baarle-Hertog address it is dealt with by the local postal system. If, however, you post it to your neighbour across the road in Baarle-Nassau the letter is international, gets sent to Turnhout then Brussels, transferred to Amsterdam by air, distributed to the regional centre in Tilburg and finally delivered to Baarle-Nassau.

To make matters more complicated, it is only for taxation and residential purposes that the front door counts. For all other legal matters, where you are inside the building dictates what is permissible. The movie theatre crosses the border, so when a movie came out that was rated X in Belgium but not in the Netherlands the Belgian police sat at the back of the theatre to make sure the audience kept to the Dutch side of the theatre.

Likewise, an old pub spanned the border. Belgian and Dutch closing times were different, so when the Dutch closing time came the owner had to lock the Dutch door and move customers over to the Belgian side of the border for the rest of the night.

A strange and crazy system, but it all seems to work out fine. The weather was perfect, people were packed in the outdoor cafes, we ate fine chocolates and quality beers and came home with a international sun tan.

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Languages in Belgium

26/5/09 Leuven

Yesterday I had my first conversation completely in Dutch. Okay, it was just asking for a return train-ticket to Brussels, but she understood, replied in Flemish and I was able to respond. Europeans won't be impressed (56% of EU citizens speak at least two languages fluently, 28% three languages and 10% four languages), but Australia does not have a multilingual education system. Baby steps...

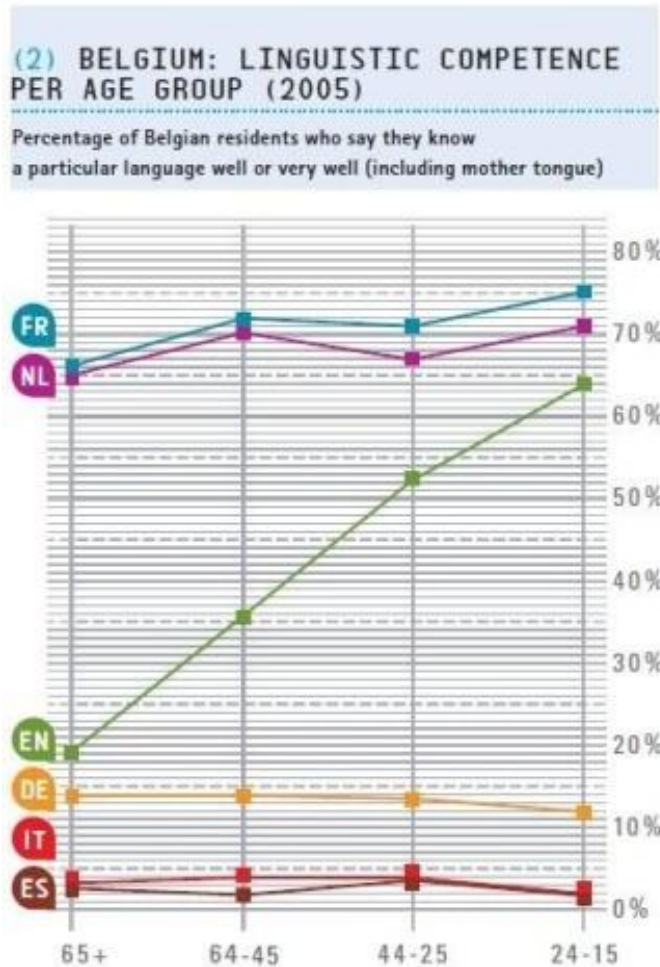
Keeping in theme, I thought I would make a quick post on the languages of Belgium.

There are three official languages, Flemish, French and German. Flanders recognises four dialects of Flemish, Brabantian, Limburgish, East Flemish and West Flemish. Belgian French is a dialect of French, but standard French is very common in Brussels. Among native speakers Flemish is the most common, however including both native and non-native speakers French is the most common. German is a clear third in each case.

Flemish - 6.23 million native speakers (plus ~800,000 Walloons who speak Dutch as a second language)
French - 4.19 million native speakers (plus ~4 million Flemings who speak French as a second language)
German - 73,000 (plus ~ 1 million Belgians who speak German as a second language)

In addition, Walloon (~600,000 speakers), Picard, Gaumais, Champenois and German Frankish have all been given official recognition as regional languages. There is also a strong Yiddish-speaking population (~20,000) in Antwerp. Brussels is much more mixed, with 56% of the 1 million Brussels residents not born in Belgium, creating large populations of Arabic, Spanish, Turkish, Portuguese and Italian speakers.

Finally there is English. Very few native speakers, but there are ~7 million Belgians who speak it as a second language. For Belgians under 25, English is nearly as common as Flemish or French. For Belgians under 15, English is actually more common than either Flemish or French, as both Flanders and Walloon shift towards teaching English as the second language.



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Flemish political parties

28/5/09 Leuven

In a week's time I have to vote in the EU elections for parties from the Flemish list. My reference point in political parties is really Australian, US and UK politics, so I have been trying to work out which Flemish parties equate to which Australian/US/UK parties. My current approximation is:

Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest)

- = One Nation (Australia)
- = Ann Coulter wing of the Republican Party (US)
- = British National Party (UK)

N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie)

- = Nationals (Australia)
- = Mike Huckabee wing of the Republican Party (US)
- = Tories (UK)

Lijst Dedecker (Dedecker's List)

- = Liberals (Australia)
- = Lou Dobbs wing of the Republican Party (US)
- = Tories (UK)

CD&V (Flemish Christian Democrat party)

- = Kevin Rudd-wing of Labor Party (Australia)
- = Blue Dog caucus in the Democratic Party (US)
- = Tony Blair-wing of Labor (UK)

Open VLD (Flemish Liberals and Democrats)

- = "Wet" Liberals (Australia)
- = Mitt Romney wing of Republican Party (US)
- = David Cameron wing of Tories (UK)

SLP (Social Liberal Party)

- = Bob Hawke wing of Labor (Australia)
- = New Democrat Coalition caucus of the Democratic Party (US)
- = "Old" Labor (UK)

SPA (Socialist Progressive Alternative)

- = Greens (Australia)
- = Progressive caucus of the Democratic Party (US)
- = Left-wing of Labor (UK)

Groen! (Green)

- = Greens (Australia)

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= Code Pink wing of the Democratic Party (US)
= Liberal Democrats (UK)

Differences and similarities between Belgian, Australian and American politics

31/5/09 Leuven

After some excellent and always informative comments by Cedric on my last post I wanted to write a few thoughts on differences and similarities between Belgian, Australian and American politics. American politics in general tends to get over-simplified, even by Americans (maybe especially by Americans?).

I quite often hear (and have even stated myself) that American politics is far to the right of European politics. This is both true and false. It is true when you consider the Republican and Democratic parties to be monolithic. Obviously the Democratic Party is right of the SP.A and SLP in Belgium, likewise the Republican party is right of CD&V and Open VLD. But there is a lot more diversity *within* the two American parties than within each of the dozen Belgian political parties. Republicans like Lincoln Chafee, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Colin Powell and Jon Huntsman really could fit into a party such as Open VLD, wanting to move the country to the right on economics and to the left on social issues. The Progressive Caucus of the Democratic Party includes politicians like Bernie Sanders, Barbara Lee, Jerrold Nadler, Donna Christian-Christensen and Carolyn Maloney, who would probably be comfortable in Green or Socialist parties in Belgium.

In one way, Belgium and America are more politically similar than Australia - both countries seem to be politically more bipolar than Australia. In America the Progressive Caucus accounts for 18% of the House and the Republican Study Committee is about 23% of the House. In Flanders the Greens and Socialists are about 25% of Flemish Parliament and Vlaams Belang is about 24% of the Flemish Parliament. In Australia, by contrast, the Greens and One Nation each hold less only around 1% of seats. To me this indicates that America and Belgium both have large left and far right populations, while Australians tend to be bunched up around the middle. The winner-takes-all system in Australia gives frequent flips in control, but with the centre-left and centre-right moving as close to each other as possible things change little.

Yet the political outcomes in Belgium and America couldn't be more different. The two party system in America means that the fringe Purple suburbs can flip the government to the Blue cities or the Red villages. Government change can have large radical implications to governance - seriously, George Bush and Barack Obama as two consecutive Presidents? In Belgium, by contrast, lots of small parties mean lots of compromises, even large shifts tend to result in similar coalitions, with just a shift in the power balance during the compromise talks.

The single member district system in America means that the Progressive Caucus has never been able to convince the Blue Dogs to risk their own jobs to pass liberal legislation, while the list system in Belgium provides a buffer between politicians and the electorate. The biggest difference of all is how Belgium and America treat the extreme right. By building a "cordon sanitaire" around Vlaams Belang (a lesson perhaps learnt after the Nazi collaborators of WWII?), the centre right has necessarily had to drift left when building coalitions, so by American

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standards the Belgians governments tend to either be centre or left. In America, by contrast, the moderate Republicans (such as the Main Street Partnership) embraced the extreme right (such as the Republican Study Committee) in a drive for power. This certainly paid off handsomely, letting the right govern as the right, rather than making a coalition with the left like in Belgium. But the moderate Republicans are now paying for their pact with the devil as they have lost control in a coup and the extreme right have taken over the party. Hopefully the right in Belgium sees this threat and keeps up the "cordon sanitaire".

I just don't understand the French-Flemish dispute

4/6/09 Leuven

[Flemish parties reject provocation by MR leader Reynders](#)

Repeating what Olivier Maingain of Brussels francophone coalition partner FDF had stated during the weekend, Didier Reynders, chairman of the MR francophone liberals, agreed that there were too many Flemings sitting in the Brussels Parliament. "There are 17 Flemish members of parliament out of 89, while only 15 percent of the population is Flemish," he said. Reynders wants the over-representation to be addressed in the talks on state reform with Flanders. The expansion of the Brussels region and the issue of the three un-appointed mayors must also be addressed "through a tranquil debate," he said. The Flemish Brussels representatives of the Flemish sister party Open VLD, Guy Vanhengel and Sven Gatz called the statements of Reynders "deplorable".

[They're at it again](#)

Well, they've done it again. Kraainem, Linkebeek and Wezembeek-Oppem - three Flemish communes on the edge of Brussels with a largely French-speaking population - have sent out polling cards in French. Again.

This violates the language laws, which state that the official language of Flanders is Dutch. This means all official documents have to be drawn up in Dutch. An exception is made for the "facility communes" near the language border, where French-speaking inhabitants can ask to be served in French. On this, everyone agrees. But how these facilities should work remains a stumbling block.

In the so-called Peeters circular, the Flemish government states that citizens wanting French translations should ask for them one document at a time. The idea was that, in time, these people would learn Dutch. But it didn't work out that way.

The local French-speaking politicians have not helped either. They insist that citizens should declare that they want their documents in French just once. For this, the Flemish government has rapped their knuckles time and time again.

Nope, I just don't get it. It seems reasonable that seats should be proportional to population size

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and that people should be able to request documents in their own language just once, rather than every single time they request documents. And Walloons are a minority in Brussels - most of the French speaking population are either immigrants or ethnic Flemings who switched to French in the last 100-200 years. Flanders is the region of Europe with the highest concentration of French as a second language people and Walloon is the region of Europe with the highest concentration of Dutch as a second language people. Okay, Walloon could try harder, but learning Flemish as an adult is hard (this I can say from personal experience) and government documents are obtuse at the best of times, so isn't this just punishing people for the education system they were raised in?

Off to London

6/6/09 London

The [British Humanist Association](#) were giving a conference on "Darwin, Humanism and Science", so I nipped over to London for the day to see Richard Dawkins, Luke and Shyla. By strange coincidence (or was it?) it was the same day that Lydia had tickets to see Britney Spears putting on a show, so there was something for everyone in London.

It was my first ride in the Channel Tunnel. In under two hours we zipped from Brussels to London. The tunnel itself was anticlimactic, no big rollercoaster dip as it went down beneath the English Channel. No glass panels to see the fish above us. Just one long smooth ride through darkness to represent a truly ingenious feat in human ingenuity and technology, beyond that of merely flying up to the moon.

I meet Luke and Shyla at the other end and we caught up over breakfast before heading to Conway Hall.

The conference organizer got up at the start to ask (in English) those people requiring simultaneous translation into French to come up the front and get headphones. There was a ripple of laughter in the audience until one person then shouted out the same message in French, getting a chorus of "ah" in reply.

[Polly Toynbee](#) introduced [Richard Dawkins](#), who spent his hour talking about the last paragraph of the Origin of Species:

"Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

It was quite an interesting talk, mostly on the importance of Darwin's insights. He also talked about the intellectual dishonesty of creationist arguments, spending quite a long time on rebutting the [Strong Anthropic Principle](#) and supporting the Weak Anthropic Principle. He came across as charming, gentle and intellectual - I enjoyed it, but wouldn't have minded a bit more

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fire-breathing. In the question time I asked him whether Charles Darwin had any insights that were extraordinary for his time, or whether it was just the period of history where enough natural history had been collected for the idea to be bubbling up.

He said that *The Origin* included some extremely impressive insights, but the main arguments were coming up from multiple sources (Wallace most obviously, but also Malthus). From his perspective the main contribution of Darwin was as a science writer, since the joint presentation of Darwin and Wallace at the Royal Society didn't even raise a stir among scientists, as just another hypothesis floated up. What the *Origin of Species* did was to provide step by step overwhelming evidence of every principle of evolution to the point that evolution just could not be rebutted on its science. This must be one of the rare cases in science where the glory went not for the original flash of insight, but rather for the slow methodological accumulation of supporting data.

Following Dawkins, [Charles Susanne](#) (from ULB) spoke about the pressures on EU governments to stop the teaching of evolution, with creationist groups running a campaign of trying to insert creationism into school curriculum (with too much success in many cases).

[James Williams](#) (University of Sussex) followed this up with a very entertaining talk on the creationist literature that is sent out to schools, often deliberately hidden in book donations to libraries and designed to instill resistance towards evolution in kids minds by playing on the love kids have for dinosaurs - such as comic books with Jesus talking to velociraptors or cowboys attacking the last pterodactyl (no kidding, they actually claim the last pterodactyl was killed in 1890 by cowboys in Arizona). Once these exciting images are installed it becomes so difficult for mere fact to displace them. He had one line that just cracked me up. He was talking about how intelligent designers rely on the argument that if there is something that science doesn't currently have an answer for it must be the result of a creator:

"No, it just doesn't work like that. You then need to do research to see if there is or isn't a natural explanation for that phenomenon. I mean, a PhD student can't just say 'I have no idea what the answer to this research question is, therefore it must be due to intelligent design - may I have my diploma now?' If intelligent design wants to be a science it needs to research the questions before it labels them as unanswerable."

During the question-time this guy got up and started ranting that he believed that evolution fashioned every organ for its own purpose, which is why he was against homosexuality, because it was using an organ for a purpose it wasn't evolved for (his analogy was "you wouldn't try drinking through your nose instead of your mouth"). He ranted for about five minutes while the rest of the audience was softly laughing and trying to see who it was with the microphone, then Polly Toynbee wisely said "well that doesn't deserve an answer, next question?"

Afterwards Luke and I met up with Shyla and Lydia for a pub meal and a beer at Shakespeare's Head, before Shyla and Lydia went off shopping. Another couple of beers at a Dutch pub and the Salisbury and it was time for me to hop on my train and be whisked back to Belgium...

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Off to vote

7/6/09 Leuven

I am off to vote today, in my first European elections. Who should I vote for? I like the position that Groen! takes on social and environment matters, but I am less fond of their policy of gratuitous exclamation point usage. Perhaps SP-A or SLP? One of the down sides of the proportional list system used in Belgium is that I will only be able to tell in retrospect if my decision was not strategic. If Groen! ends up with 2.1 quotas and SP-A with 1.9 quotas a vote for Groen! instead of SP-A would have been entirely wasted. Having three progressive-left parties splits their quotas, if all three end up with 3.9 quotas the progressive-left will get a total of 9 seats, while a preference system would merge their quotas (to 11.7 quotas) and give them an extra two seats. Or can a party already use its surplus quota to "vote" for a like-minded party? Less democratic than direct preference voting, but it would give a more representative result without changing the ballot.

European elections

15/6/09 Leuven

As every article has told us, the recent European elections were a sweeping victory for the centre-right and the far-right across Europe, and the left are [tongue-tied](#). By naming a few examples you can show the socialists losing seats in power and in opposition. But is this actually a fair characterisation of the election results? In terms of adjusted seats, out of a parliament of 736 the centre-right Christian Democratic parties gained an extra 20 seats while the centre-left Socialists lost 35 seats. However the big story on the left side of parliament is the shift from Socialists to Greens, who gained 13 seats off the Socialists. This is a long-term trend as left-politics tends to be shifting from work rights to social/environmental rights and is interesting, but is an internal left story. So we have Christian Democrats on +20 and Socialists/Greens on a net of -22, which translates to about 2.5% of seats shifting from centre-left to centre-right.

So the shift between centre-right and centre-left was much more mild than is reported in the press, it is also much less homogenous. Here are the results country-by-country with the balance between centre-right and centre-left seats (with the net to the left in brackets).

Centre-left win (ranked by margin)

Czech Republic 2:7 (+5)

Denmark 1:6 (+5)

Belgium 6:8 (+2)

Sweden 5:7 (+2)

Left-right tie or +1/-1

France 29:28 (+1)

Greece 8:9 (+1)

Malta 2:3 (+1)

Netherlands 5:6 (+1)

Austria 6:6 (even)

Estonia 1:1 (even)

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Lativa 1:1 (even)
Spain 23:23 (even)
Cyprus 2:1 (-1)
Ireland 4:3 (-1)
Lithuania 4:3 (-1)
Luxembourg 3:2 (-1)
Romania 13:12 (-1)
Slovakia 6:5 (-1)
Slovenia 3:2 (-1)

Centre-right win (ranked by margin)

Italy 35:0[21] (-35 [-14])
Poland 28:7 (-21)
Hungary 14:4 (-10)
UK 0[26]:18 (+18[-8])
Germany 42:37 (-5)
Portugal 10:7 (-3)
Bulgaria 6:4 (-2)

The interesting thing about this ranking is that clearly most European nations gave a basically even split between centre-right and centre-left votes. Only a handful had centre-right or centre-left winning more than one seat than the opponents. The other interesting thing is that you can account for almost the entire swing with just two countries - Italy and Poland, the two most famously unstable political systems in Europe, with massive swings and government changes every couple of years the norm. If you ignore these two countries there was almost no European shift.

What actually happened in the European elections was that the centre-left vote shifted from the Socialist parties to the Green parties. We had a couple of big shifts to the right in Poland and Italy, and a few extra seats dribbled to the far-right. The left should not be happy with the result, but it is simply bad reporting (and bad mathematics) to conclude that there was a Europe-wide shift between left and right.

From Leuven to Brussels

10/7/09 Brussels

I have been too busy to write for weeks with all the effort required in moving from Leuven to Brussels. Coordinating a 15-story crane, a moving company, Ikea and police departments in Leuven and Brussels was not fun, but eventually everything came together and a small truck moved all our (very few) material possessions from Leuven to Brussels. The apartment is slowly coming together, made more complicated by the Belgian habit of taking *everything* with you when you leave the house, down to the light bulbs and fixtures (leaving bare wires hanging from the roof). Lydia followed the process in [her blog](#).

In some ways we are only 25km removed, in others we are in two different worlds. Leuven is a

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small Flemish university town, Brussels is a large predominantly French-speaking metropolis. From the bourgeoisie neighbourhood of inner Leuven, full of boutique shops and elegant Flemish youths, we are now in gritty Porte de Hal, Bruxelles (or Hallepoort, Brussel, if you are a Flemish speaker), a melting pot of French-speaking cultures from around Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

The Roman Baths

18/7/09 Bath

Two days after moving into our new home in Brussels and we had our first house guest. My brother Russell was in town on his first European vacation and visited us in Belgium in between mountain biking in the French Alps and his whirlwind tour around Europe. It was really great to see him again and to share the new life that we have established here in Belgium, a life that Lydia



and I have worked so hard for.

The one place that Russell wasn't going to see on his trip was the United Kingdom, so we decided to take him on a brief trip across England and Wales. We caught the train from Midi to St Pancras, two hours from our house to the centre of London, meet up with our good friends Luke and Shyla and drove out of the big smoke.

Our first stop was in Bath, to see the stunning 18th century Georgian architecture and the ancient Roman Baths.

It was a really beautiful city to wander around, surprisingly lively, stunningly picturesque in the warm evening light and oddly maritime with the squawk of seagulls overhead. Out the front of the Roman Baths were large and peculiar statues ("Minotaur and Lady-Hare Torsos" by Sophie Ryder) under constant video surveillance, with posters up praising the people who knocked them down at Easter as a public service against hideous public art.



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The Roman Baths themselves were really very interesting. They have been in constant use and redesign, with everyone from the Romans onwards taking advantage of the geothermal hot spring that wells up under Bath. It was quite hard to tell where genuine Roman architecture stopped and imitation classical architecture began. For me the most interesting part were the Roman artifacts that had been dredged up from the site, such as the engraved signet stones that had fallen out from Roman rings when the heat of the bath melted the wax holding them in, or the foul curses cast against petty crimes that were thrown into the temple spring in a wish for revenge ("*Docimedis perdidit manicilia dua qui illas involavit ut mentes suas perdat et oculos suos in fano ubi destinat*", roughly "Docimedis has lost two gloves.

He asks that the person who has stolen them should lose his minds and his eyes in the temple where she appoints").

We had nice Thai for dinner with a truly disgusting organic cider, then drove onwards to Ross-on-Wye.

Hedgehogs and falcons

19/7/09 Symonds Yat

We spent Saturday night at a school camp dorm, near Ross-on-Wye, courtesy of an old friend of Lydia's from when she lived in Cornwall. They kindly took us out to Ross-on-Wye for a good English breakfast the next morning, then out to Symonds Yat. Symonds Yat looks out over the Dean forest and the [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#) kindly had volunteers at the yat



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with telescopes set up on the Peregrine Falcon rooks. We went down to Symonds Yat East for a beer, watched the cutest little hedgehog trundle along, then had a Cornish pasty for lunch in Hereford (after investigating the Old House of Hereford, built in 1610). The rest of Sunday was spent driving across Wales in miserable weather to Llanberis in Snowdonia National Park. We had a wonderful end to the day, with a butternut pumpkin lasagne and great cider at the Peak Restaurant in Llanberis, followed by a few beers sitting out in the Welsh fields.

The mountains and castles of Wales

20/7/09 Llanberis

The weather looked poor in Llanberis, so we headed out for the coast and ended up having a glorious day with perfect weather.



Our first stop was Caernarfon Castle. The castle was constructed by King Edward I of England, after his invasion of Gwynedd in 1283. It was modelled on the walls of Constantinople and cost £22,000 (a staggering amount at the time, more than the royal income for a year), forming one of the strongest castles in Europe in an effort to hold on to his gains in Wales. Without the series of castles we saw at Caernarfon, Conwy and Dolbadern it is unlikely that Edward the First could have conquered Wales at all. One of the pleasant surprises of Caernarfon (apart from the perfect weather and beautiful stonework) was seeing Welsh as a living vibrant language.

I had half expected Welsh to be limited to old men mumbling to each other in smoky bars, but instead bilingual signs were not just on official government signage, but also on private businesses. As a sign of how alive and well the language is we saw a well dressed young woman abuse her five year old daughter in Welsh - obviously not something you do in a second language.

Following Caernarfon we drove to Conwy, to see the city walls and castle also built by King Edward (between 1283 and 1289). We also saw in Conwy the smallest house in Great Britain. It was condemned for human habitation in 1900, then the owner then went around Great Britain with a ruler measuring small houses to prove that his was the smallest.

On the drive back to Llanberis we passed through Llanrwst, with its beautiful stone bridge, and Betws-y-Coed. St Michael's Church at Betws-y-Coed is closed down now but shows a rich

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heritage of tombstones (with an interesting transition from Welsh to English on family tombs). We stopped at Swallow Falls, where they charged us one pound to see the waterfall and we got scared out of the toffee shop by a Grandmother promising to beat her child when they got home, then climbed over the ruins of Dolbadern Castle back in Llanberis.

It was really a beautiful day spent in the mountains and castles of Wales.

The accident of birth

21/7/09 Wolverhampton

Who could drive from Wales to London without going through Ironbridge Gorge, the cradle of the industrial revolution? The bridge is rather unassuming, just 7.3m wide, 30.6m long and 16.75m high, but at the time it was revolutionary. It was designed by Thomas Pritchard in 1775 and built by Abraham Darby III in 1777-79 as an advertisement for the skills of the Coalbrookdale ironmasters. It was the first bridge in the world to be made totally from iron, using 384 tonnes of metal, and artists and engineers came from around the world to see it. Abraham Darby was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Society of Arts for the artistic merit of the bridge, which was widely praised:

"But of the Iron Bridge over the Severn, which we crossed and where we stopped for half an hour, what shall I say? That it must be the admiration, as it is one of the wonders of the world."

John Byng, Viscount Torrington, 1784



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"...a far greater and more wonder piece of Architecture is now in agitation, a Fabric which England or the whole Globe cannot equal. This is an Iron Bridge... the whole will be of Cast Iron without an ounce of any other sort of material about it..."

J.M. Fisher, 1776

To be fair, the town itself was not received with the same glory:

"Coalbrookdale wants nothing but Cererus to give you an idea of the heathen hell. The Severn may pass for the Styx..."

Charles Didbin, Dramatist and Songwriter, 1787

"...an uninteresting and somewhat squalid town... sloping down to the Severn whose banks are... covered with slag and refuse."

J.E. Auden, 1912

From Ironbridge we drove to Wolverhampton. It is thanks to an accident of birth in this small industrial town outside Birmingham that Lydia and I are able to live in Europe today. My mother was born in Wolverhampton and migrated to Australia on the ship "New Australia" in 1957 on a one-way family migration ticket, a "ten pound Pom" on Australia's mission to fill up the country with English immigrants. Her family, the Spencers of Wolverhampton, are actually related to the Spencers of Northampton (the most famous of which was Princess Diana), although there must have been another accident of birth or some seriously bad life choices at some point down to line to make our branch poor enough for the family of six to sit on a ship for 38 days on their way to poverty in a new country (albiet one with better weather).

Finally, we finished the day by visiting Cadbury World in Birmingham, where Lydia was camouflaged in a sea of royal purple chocolate.

Up the Eye

22/7/09 London

We had almost the entire day in London before we had to head home to Brussels, but oddly the time just flew by and we didn't really end up doing that much. We walked around a bit, went to the movies and saw "Bruno" and then took a flight on the London Eye. The view is actually very good from up on the Eye, with an excellent vantage point over the Houses of Parliament, it must be quite the sight in good weather.



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Lydia decided that she would like to have a Cupid Pod like the couple next to us.

Afterwards we saw the interesting "Battle of Britain" monument, dedicated to the pilots who fought above Britain during the Nazi attacks in WWII. Remarkably this battle which raged over four months, so pivotal in history and killing 60,000 civilians, was fought by the Allies with only 2936 pilots (from around the world), of whom just 544 died during the battles. Winston Churchill's words remain apt today: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

Finally, we went to the Australian shop to stock up on essential items unavailable in Belgium (vegemite, barbeque shapes, mint sauce and the like), then had a final farewell beer with Russell before heading back to Brussels.

Eighty eight wonderful canals

23/7/09 Leuven

Even though we have moved from Flemish-speaking Leuven to French-speaking Brussels I am spending a lot more time learning Flemish now. I am practicing with conversation CDs and flashcards and am getting much better at reading in Flemish. Speaking Flemish remains an enormous hurdle, as my pronunciation is so appalling that I just get blank looks, and writing in Flemish is an impossibility as my brain keeps on writing Dutch words with English phonetics. It will be a long time before I will be able to say I saw eighty eight wonderful canals in Dutch (["achtentachtig prachtige grachten"](#) is a tongue-twister for even native Dutch speakers).

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Belgian summer

23/7/09 Brussels

After a glorious Spring, the last couple of Summer days have been seriously crummy, weather-wise. Apparently Google has been made aware of the weather in Belgium, and is using it to [cool down](#) their data centres:

Data centers get very hot, and need to be cooled. But Google's data center in Belgium gets all the cooling it needs from two non-electrical sources: non-municipal water brought in from nearby canals, and the surrounding air. Belgium's cool climate means that the air outside is usually cold enough to naturally cool the hot computing parts inside, except for about seven days per year, on average.

I'm not sure this is actually good PR for Belgium...

Eat your crusts

25/7/09 Brussels

Last night we went out for dinner with the lab, and as these things do the topic of sayings about eating your crusts came up. In Australia parents would say something like "eat your crusts, it'll put hair on your chest" or "eat your crusts, it'll make your hair go curly". Exactly why curly hair or hair on your chest was so desirable was never really explained, and my mum (at least) said this to both boys and girls with equal frequency. I was told last night that in Flanders parents instead say something like "korsten geven nieuwe borsten", which would translate into English as "crusts will give new new breasts".

My first Dutch book

28/7/09 Brussels

I am about halfway through my first Dutch book, in fact my first book in a language other than English. Okay, it isn't exactly a novel, it is "Kuifje: De Scepter Van Ottokar" ("Tintin: King Ottokar's Sceptre"), but I've been slaving over this thing like Champollion studying the Rosetta Stone.

I was previously given [advice](#) that the best way to learn a second language is by getting a native-speaker girlfriend and reading pornographic comics together. Reading Tintin while Lydia is asleep probably doesn't fully qualify, but I've found the comic format much less daunting, with the added plus that the visual aspects give you contextual hints as to what you are reading. Probably making it more difficult is the use of comic book slang from the 1930s, and the use of mangled Brussels dialect (like a regional Dutch/French fusion language) to indicate foreigners.

Muslims in Belgium

29/7/09 Leuven

I just read an interesting article about [the Islamisation myth](#). Islam in Europe has obviously stirred up a lot of fears among Belgium's neighbours, the Netherlands, Germany and France. I

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could be wrong, but it doesn't really seem like a huge deal in Belgium. Perhaps the (mostly) friendly rivalry between Dutch and French speakers redirects the fears of those concerned with "cultural pollution". Or perhaps it is because most Muslims in Belgium are Moroccan and Turkish immigrants living in Brussels, which both the French and Flemish appear to have disdainful views of anyway. If anything, the big issues appears to be immigrant populations trying to get public attention over the legal catch-22 that "paperless" immigrants end up in, while the government pretty much ignores it and bickers about [more important issues](#).

Interestingly, I think the fear of Islam in Europe comes from two different sources. Firstly, there are the fundamentalist Christians (yes, Europe has them, just not that many) who see Christianity and Islam in a supernatural conflict. This group wants to use the "threat" of Islam to whip secular Europe back into the fold of the Church, and probably also has genuine (and unfounded) bed-wetting fears about forced conversion to Islam. More importantly though, because it is more common, I think there is a vague unease about Islam among secular Europe, simply because they appear more religious and more conservative. It isn't that this group wants to protect Christianity, far from it, but rather that they worry that a fresh infusion of religion will bring back the bad old days and unravel European secular tolerance.

I think there is a grain of truth to this big, in a big sloppy serving of fear. First the truth - on average European Muslims are more religious and more conservative than European Christians, more likely to go to church and less likely to support religious freedoms like same-sex marriage or reproductive rights. However, I think this fear has been radically overblown. The proportion of European Muslims who think Europeans are anti-Muslim [is much higher](#) than the proportion of European Muslims who have had any personal experience of anti-Muslim behaviour. Likewise the perceptions of non-Muslim Europeans are inaccurate - the proportion of European Muslims who are moderate and are concerned about Islamic extremism [is much higher](#) than the proportion who are fundamentalists and support extremism, and European Muslims are less religious and less conservative than is generally realised. On questions such as homosexuality, having affairs, abortion, pre-marital sex and suicide, European Muslims are more conservative than the general European public, but they are [about on par](#) with American Christians - far less conservative than their country of origin. Most European Muslims also think that life for women is [better in the West](#) than in Islamic countries. Second and third generation European Muslims are even less religious and more progressive, approaching the consensus view in the general public of the country they are integrated in. The issues that European Muslims are most concerned about is not the decline in religion or the encroachment of Western lifestyles, but rather more [practical concerns](#) such as unemployment and housing.

So to secular Europe I say: keep an eye on religious extremism, but don't become paranoid about Islam in particular. If European secular tolerance could dethrone the allmighty Catholic Church, it'll win over a few immigrants who wear headscarves instead of crosses. Given time and freedom, most people, regardless of ethnicity or religion, ultimately care more about having a job and getting their kids into good education than about who is having sex with who next door. Perhaps this is why Belgium doesn't seem to have the same Islamophobia as other parts of Europe - Belgian Muslims are already [less religious](#) than Belgian Catholics. In my neighbourhood (the Marollen, the most diverse immigrant neighbourhood in Belgium), Belgian

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Congolese, North African immigrants, Walloons and Flemings all seem to be far more concerned with good food than churches or mosques.

Belgium bombed Germany

30/7/09 Brussels

It seems to have missed most of the news, but on Monday Belgium literally dropped a bomb on Germany. Apparently the Belgian air-force was on a much needed training run when they accidentally [dropped a bomb from a F-16 Fighter Jet](#) while flying over Germany. Luckily no one was hurt, the bomb narrowly missing the small town of Lastrup, and the Germans seem to have accepted our apologies.

Thinking it was a good time to test our luck, we went to the fair last night with our good friends John and Jay to play [Guinea pig roulette](#). On our first (and only) spin at the pig John came up trumps and won us a toaster. Honest and true - we won a toaster by betting on the 'pigs'.

Mega-Mindy

31/7/09 Leuven

Today at the train station I saw a young girl (maybe eight or nine years old) dressed up in a full [Mega Mindy](#) outfit, glowing pink body suit, logo and all. Mega Mindy is all the rage among young Flemings. She is the alter ego of shy Mieke, a police officer who when villains threaten puts on pink (including a mask which is even more useless than that of most superheroes at concealing her secret identity) and leaps into action. She seems to be both lauded as a positive role model for Belgian girls (being both pink *and* sassy, as opposed to the incompetent men in the series), and at the same time rather male-orientated (she does it all to gain the love of useless Toby). Perhaps it is indicative of women's rights in Belgium? The legal protections are excellent, education of women is probably even better than that of men and young women are certainly competing equally with men when entering the workforce. Yet at the same time there seems to be a lot of social pressure on women to be the home-makers and child carers in a relationship (even when both are working), so workforce participation among women is much lower and few women feel they have the time to stay in professional careers long enough to be able to rise to the top levels.



Chartreux kittens and Waterloo

1/8/09 Waterloo

We have two new members of our family, a pair of tiny Chartreux kittens. Lydia has been very keen to get a cat, and after extensive investigation she decided on the Chartreux, a breed of French kitten bred by the Carthusian monks for their fur. They have a beautiful gray-blue coat

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and deep blue eyes when they are young, changing to gold as they age. In behaviour they are sort of between a cat and a dog, being willing to fetch balls and respond to their names, following you around the house and not meowing. One of the odd traditions of having a Chartreux is that the first letter of its official name encodes the year of its birth, so for 2009 kittens their official name should start with an "E". We visited our little kittens in a small town just outside Charleroi, but they were too small to take home so they are staying for another two weeks.



After our kitten visit we stopped off with our good friends John and Jay to visit Waterloo, the site of the famous defeat of Napoleon by a coalition of forces led by Wellington on June 18, 1815. It was perfect weather so we sat at the old pub drinking beer and coffee next to a table of Napoleonic soldiers, before walking up Hameau de lion (the Lion's Mound). This conical hill, 41 metres high, was built between 1824 and 1826 as a monument to the soldiers killed in the battle. On top of the hill, after 226 steps, stands the Lion, weighing 28 tonnes, which keeps an iron grip over peace in the world. We also visited the Waterloo Panorama, a circular painting that you stand inside to imagine the scene of the battle, but it wasn't a patch over the [Defence of Sevastopol](#) panorama we saw in the Ukraine.

Violence over language

5/8/09 Brussels

There is an [interesting article](#) about the ferocity (and pettiness) that can rage over language in Belgium, using the contentious example of Voeren. Briefly, it goes something like this:

Voeren is a small town wedged between French-speaking Liege (in Belgium) and the Netherlands. When Belgium introduced language laws in 1932 splitting the country into Flemish and French-speaking areas, the tiny enclave was designated Flemish based on the 1930 census, being placed in the province of Limburg (which it is not connected to). However, a census in 1947 showed that the majority of the residents now spoke French.

This resulted in the situation where a small mostly French-speaking town, surrounded by French-speaking Liege, were actually part of Flemish-speaking Limburg.

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Of course this meant political problems, including violent riots in 1979. The absurdity of the situation was shown when French-speaking Jose Happart was elected the mayor of Voeren by the French-speaking majority in 1983, but was dismissed from his position for not being able to speak Flemish (the consequences of which ended up toppling the national government). Just a few years ago, in 2006, the Flemish government decided to abolish all official French translations, so now this region only has signs in Flemish, despite all the French speakers.

Ah well, it all sounds crazy and I really think it is, but despite the bickering the French and Flemish populations of Belgium get on better than most mixed cultures. Flanders has the highest proportion of French-as-a-second-language in the world and Walloon has the highest proportion of Dutch-as-a-second-language in the world, and the Flemings and Walloons have never fought a war against each other, even banding together against both France and the Netherlands when it came to it.



Monarchy and beard

11/8/09 Brussels

According to [this](#) you are only ready to take on the Belgian throne when you have a beard. This may explain why Belgium has never had a Queen. As an aside, there is no King of Belgium, there is only the King of the Belgians.

Belgium's Crown Prince Philippe has grown a beard, sparking claims he will soon be king.

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The 50-year-old royal sported the tidy grey facial hair for the first time last weekend, and rumours are rife his change in image suggests the prince is planning to ascend to the throne.

Top Italian hairdresser Figaro Pasquale told Dutch-language newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws: "He is ready for the throne. His beard shows that, it suggests a depth and confidence and projects a majestic man."

French newspaper La Dernière-Heure reports: "Some believe that it gives him a more mature appearance, more assured, others say it makes him look a bit old. We must wait until he returns from holiday to find out if this hirsuteness is temporary."

Philippe has been groomed from childhood to succeed his childless uncle, King Baudouin.

However, when Baudouin died in 1993, the prince was deemed too inexperienced to rule the country and his father Albert ascended to the throne instead.

Since then, some critics have claimed Philippe should give up the chance to become king if his daughter Elizabeth - who is currently eight - is old enough to take over from 75-year-old Albert.

The last Belgian monarch to sport a beard was King Leopold II, who ruled at the beginning of the 20th century.

Brussels rules

11/8/09 Brussels

Lydia has been translating our 100 page tome of apartment rules. They appear to cover everything, such as:

- We cannot chop firewood in our apartment. If we are to bring in firewood to our apartment, it must be before 10am.
- We must not use large amounts of water after 10pm.
- All animals must be good, and must not cause annoyance.
- All pianos must be at least 10 cm from the wall.
- We cannot beat carpets out the window against the exterior wall.
- If we buy the apartment above or below us, we may seek approval to install a new staircase between the two apartments.
- We must be polite to the other residents.

Hot hot Belgium

20/8/09 Brussels

Another heat wave in Belgium, the second of the summer. The long blue sky days are delicious until the cold front starts to move in, giving a few days where the humidity builds up but the heat remains, until it finally breaks in a torrential downpour. Thursday the 20th of August is now going down as officially the hottest day on record in Belgium, at what is considered a scorcher 38.2 °C (100.8 °F). Hot to be sure, but nothing approaching the baking temperatures that South

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Australia reaches, with temperatures over 40 °C all too common, and a long-term record of 50.7 °C (123.3 °F).

Who are you in Brussels?

21/8/09 Brussels

In Adelaide I would be an Adelaidean, in Canberra a Canberrean, in Seattle a Seattleite and in Leuven a Leuvenier (or possibly "[Cowshooter](#)"). In Brussels? I don't know if there is a non-political way to say you are from Brussels. The French would say they are Bruxellois, the Dutch would say they are Brusselaars. And those who speak Brussels French or Brussels Dutch would disagree, calling themselves Brusseleirs and Brusseleers respectively. I wonder what the quarter of people who live in Brussels but don't speak French or Dutch call themselves?

The Giants of Ath

22/8/09 Ath

It was a beautiful day so we set out with friends to visit la Duccase d'Ath, the Giant Festival of Ath. Everyone in Ath seemed to be outside for the festival and the wonderful weather (although there did not appear to be many, if any, tourists, with empty trains going in and out). A typical fair ground filled up the central square and copious amounts of festival beer were being sold.



It was a beautiful day to be enjoying a festival, although the whole thing seemed to go over our heads. There was a giant Goliath and another giant (she didn't have a name, so I'll just call her Goliath's wife) and they started at the town hall and then danced their way to the Church. Everyone yelled and cheered (and have a 12 gun salute) whenever they kissed, then they all packed into the Church for a long and official wedding ceremony, a process which took around four hours.

Every person of significance in Ath came and had their photos taken with Goliath and his wife. Several families in Ath (descended from mill workers) have responsibility for carrying the giants, taking shifts to twirl inside the large heavy costumes.

Then along with Goliath and his wife there were a few additional characters of no clear function. There was "Magnon", a devil character with inflated pig's bladders, two "wild men" dressed up in green leaves, and

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two "horse-vamps" (men dressed up as men on horses). There was also a little boy with red ribbons on his white outfit, which we later figured out was David.

After the wedding everyone celebrated and the giants danced and twirled their way back to the town hall with thunderous applause. Then the little boy David stepped out, threw a rock at Goliath killing him, and everyone clapped even more and left. Such fickle people from Ath, seeming so fond of Goliath and his wife, celebrating their marriage, and then applauding the loutish David who killed Goliath on his wedding day for no particular reason. Huh.

Far out Brussels sprout

24/8/09 Brussels

Brussels sprouts are oddly iconic in Australia, with a savage reputation among Australian children for being the foulest object imaginable. In fact, "Brussels sprout" approached the level of a curse when I was in primary school - "far out Brussels sprout" was a pretty emphatic utterance for a six year old. Ask any Australian child what their least favourite vegetable is and I am sure that nine out of ten would say "Brussels sprouts". Likewise "eat your sprouts" must have been uttered by parents in Australia a billion times over.

Why are they called Brussels sprouts? They were grown in Belgium as early as the 1200s and spread out to the Anglo and Germanic Europe in the 1600s. There was a tradition until recently to cut a cross in the base of a Brussels sprout in order to prevent them from turning into a "were-sprout". As wonderful an image as this conjures up, it is probably much more mundane - when overcooked Brussels sprouts release foul sulphur odours (from glucosinolate and sinigrin, probably the source of Australian distaste as Australian cooking used to involve overcooking everything) and cutting a cross into the sprout allows more even cooking and hence a shorter boil.

Ulenspiegel

24/8/09 Brussels

I read the *Legend of Ulenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak and Their Adventures Heroical, Joyous and Glorious in the Land of Flanders and Elsewhere* by Charles De Coster on recommendation from Cedric. It is quite an interesting book for anyone who wants to read about the history of Flanders, being set in the 1500s (from the perspective of the 1800s). The hero of the story,



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Ulenspiegel ("your mirror") is sort of like the folk lore image of Ned Kelly in Australia, a rascally outlaw who is cheered for defying power even though he never actually helps the common folk (cf Robin Hood). He travels around Flanders showing up the nasty aspect that people hid, sometimes in a humourous manner, sometimes unnecessarily nasty or even violent. Or perhaps Ned Kelly with perhaps a dash of Forrest Gump, as Ulenspiegel happens to wind up as an onlooker in every event of significance in Flanders that the author could fit into the story and time-frame.

What I found interesting was the historic perspective this story gives on the 1800s. Charles De Coster writes with contempt about the Emperor Phillippe and the Catholic Church for the atrocities that lead to the reformation and the even greater atrocities that took place during the counter reformation. Burning of the feet of innocent women accused of witchcraft, torturing widows and children on the rack, cutting off tongues and the like are all presented as evil violence revealing an evil occupation. Possibly more revealing though is the casual backdrop of violence that De Coster uses for his setting in the 1500s that doesn't warrant any commentary from the 1800s perspective. The father of Ulenspiegel is universally presented as a good, solid Flemish man, with the occasional beating of his wife and son being just part of the narrative and not presented in a negative light. For example, from the perspective of De Coster in 1800s Flanders, Claes beating his son was a loving parental gesture:

Being weaned, Ulenspiegel grew like a young poplar. Claes now did not kiss him often, but loved him with a surly air so as not to spoil him. When Ulenspiegel would come home, complaining of being beaten in some fray, Claes would beat him because he had not beaten the others, and thus educated Ulenspiegel became valiant as a young lion. (Book I. IX).

Or when Soetkin (Claes's wife) and her friend Katheline were thinking of a plot to keep Katheline and her infant unharmed - being unmarried Katheline would either have to strangle her child to hide living a "loose life" or be whipped at the marketplace. Their plot was to pass off Katheline's child as Soetkin's, who was concurrently pregnant. Soetkin approached this plan to her husband Claes circumspectly:

"If instead of one child I had two, would you beat me, husband?"
"I don't know that," replied Claes (Book I. XV).

as if a husband beating his wife for having twins instead of a single child would justify a beating!

Another interesting part of Ulenspiegel was seeing my university mentioned:

Claes heard that it was thenceforward straightly forbidden, to all men in general and in particular, to print, read, have, or maintain the writings, books, or doctrine of Martin Luther, Johannes Wycliff, Johannes Huss, Marcilius de Padua, AEcolampadius, Ulricus Zwinglius, Philippus Melancthon, Franciscus Lambertus, Joannes Pomeranus, Otto Brunselius, Justus Jonas, Johannes Puperis et Gorcianus, the New Testaments printed by Adrien de Berghes, Christopher de Remonda, and Joannes Zel, full of Lutheran and other heresies, banned and condemned by the Theological Faculty of the University of Louvain

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.... "Furthermore," said the proclamation, "no man, of whatever station, shall put himself forward to discuss or dispute upon Holy Writ, even upon matters that are held in doubt, if he is not a theologian renowned and approved by a great university." (Book I, X).

So strange by modern standards to consider a university being directly involved in banned the spread of knowledge, on the penalty of being burnt alive. As an aside, the resulting exodus of freethinkers and Protestants from Belgium during the counter-reformation was so crippling to Belgium that it became known as the "Spanish lobotomy". One could wonder why it wasn't called the "Catholic lobotomy", given the central role of the Church in the process.

Afkrabsel van mettekouwskluute

27/8/09 Brussels

I went yesterday to change my registration to our new commune, in St Gilles. The town hall in St Gilles is meant to be one of the most beautiful in Brussels, and several people have risen up from politics in this small commune to reach heights (such as Henri Spaak "Mr Europe" who started his political career as mayor of St Gilles, before going on to become Belgian foreign minister, President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, Secretary-General of NATO and President of the Organisation of European Economic Cooperation). Despite this, St Gilles is not a prestigious or rich commune, in fact it is one of the poorest and one of the hardest to control. When riots break out in Brussels they are normally in St Gilles, such as riots around 10 years ago in protests that non-Europeans face in dealing with the government.

Even now, as an EU citizen I was allowed to make an appointment and just show up at my appointment time, while Lydia (not being EU) was not allowed to make an appointment and had to wait for three hours until a vacancy came up.

Difficulties in St Gilles are by no means new - St Gilles covers part of what was once called the Marollien. The Marollien were always the poor of Brussels, migrants, unemployed, petty criminals or illiterates, they made a fusion culture known for its swaggering style with a hard edge. A mixture of the poor and immigrants, the Marolliens could speak neither French nor Dutch well, sticking to a simplified fusion of the two languages, with a smatter of Spanish and other immigrant languages mixed in, eg:

Clachehop ("bald") - modified from the Dutch for slap head

Choukelief ("darling") - fusing the French chou (cabbage) with the Dutch diminutive

Faire scampavie ("to cheat on your partner") - from the Spanish word for a small boat used to pursue smugglers

Zwanzer ("to joke") - from the Yiddish word for penis

One linguistic area where they were admired is in creative insults, such as *afkrabsel van mettekouwskluute* (scrapings of a monkey's testicles), and the descriptive degrees they had for being drunk:

schijlzat - squint drunk

duudzat - dead drunk

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strontzat - shit drunk

crimineelzat - criminally drunk

strontcrimineelzat - criminally shit drunk

bordiklegzat - whorehouse drunk

When Leopold II started to destroy the Marollien with the construction of mega-projects like the Palace of Justice (destroying 3000 homes) the poor people of the Marolles hated it, adding *architek* and *schieven architek* (twisted architect) to their already creative set of insults. The day after the Palace of Justice was inaugurated on October 18, 1883, it was thrown open to the public, and the Marolliens protested by urinating on the carpets, and destroying statues.

Avenue Louise

29/8/09 Brussels

Avenue Louise is the Champs Elysées of Brussels. Actually just like the Champs Elysées it is too big a thoroughfare to be that pleasant to shop on and the stores contain more bored staff than (overpriced) items. The street was renamed after Princess Louise, daughter of Leopold II, after it became a major shopping destination. "That's nice", you might think, but it is actually quite a cruel name. Louise had an unhappy marriage with Prince Philip of Saxe-Coburg, and ran away with a lover in France. The husband chased them down and fought (and lost) a duel with her lover. She became a chronic shopaholic, to the extent where Leopold II published advertisements in France warning shopkeepers not to give her credit, but she became heavily in debt anyway. Her husband and father then colluded to offer her a deal - she could either return to her husband or be confined to an insane asylum. She refused to go back, her lover was sent to jail and she was sent to an insane asylum for six years. Reunited again after six years, Louise and her lover were sued by the old creditors and Leopold II managed to block her receiving any of her inheritance, such that poor Louise died penniless due to a cruel husband and father and an addiction to shopping when depressed. Kind of horrible to name the most expensive shopping street in Belgium after her, hey?

The Citadel of Dinant

6/9/09 Dinant

We decided to take Lina out for the day to the small town of Dinant. A tiny town in the French part of Belgium, Dinant is famous for its Citadel, hanging high above the town on the cliffs, and for being the birthplace of Adolphe Sax, the inventor of the saxophone. The site has such good natural defences that Dinant has existed since 800 BCE and there has been a major fortress above the town since 1040 CE.



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The Citadel has been destroyed multiple times since then, by Charles the Bold in 1466, by Louis XIV in 1675 and in 1818 by the Dutch. The current Citadel was rebuilt by the Dutch in 1821. The Citadel itself is fairly plain, the highlight was actually catching the cable-car up to the top to have a view over the beautiful little town. Nicer than the Citadel is the Collegiate Church of Notre-Dame, built in 1227 and reaching up to nearly the base of the Citadel with its beautiful spire.



Our plan was just to come along to Dinant, see the Citadel and the statue of a saxophone and perhaps try the local biscuit *couque* (the hardest biscuit in Europe, which is moulded into interesting scenes before being baked. It is so hard that the bakeries just nailed examples of their biscuits onto the wall with regular nails to display them). Instead, by chance we had arrived on "Chapitre du Tournoi", a local festival.

We were happily sitting down to pizza when a giant puppet walked over the bridge into town. "Ahuh", we thought, "a Walloon festival!" Sure enough, another giant puppet and a giant horse came into town, parades started up and people were milling around wearing elaborate costumes. Best of all was the [flamiche](#) eating competition, which is a type of rich cream cheese quiche unique to the region. A fascinating event, it proved beyond a doubt why there will never be a European champion for a food eating competition. The record (not reached this year) for pie-eating was 14 in 45 minutes. I thought that was actually pretty impressive, but once the tournament began I saw that they actually meant 14 slices. I couldn't help laughing when the waiters, wearing white gloves, brought out the slices of pie to each contestant, who then casually picked up a knife and fork and started to slowly savour the rich pie. And of course a glass of

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vintage burgundy was served to each contestant, the traditional accompaniment to flaminche. The eaters slowly ate their pie, sipped the wine, chatted to each other and generally had a nice time. Most retired from the competition about halfway through, having only made it through two or three slices. The winner made it to around ten slices, which is really only one largish quiche. I just don't think Europeans have it in them to gorge and shove as much food as possible into their throats without vomiting (or tasting, for that matter).

Hierarchy in Leuven

19/9/09 Leuven

I thought this was quite telling with regards to the Belgian approach to hierarchy:

"The parking policy at the academic side of the campus is based on the following principles.

- Professors with the degree of "gewoon hoogleraar" (full professor) or "hoogleraar" (professors) get access to the underground parking in ON2.
- Professors with the degree of "Hoofddocent" (senior lecturer / associate professor) get access to parking 5.
- Professors with the degree of "docent" (lecturer / assistant professor) must park on parking 3.
- Other research workers are referred to the villa."

Fortification and combat in Brussels and Namur

20/9/09 Namur

This weekend is [Brussels Monument Weekend](#), where every monument in Brussels becomes open to the public. We had plans to use the weekend to see some of the more inaccessible monuments in Brussels, but in the end we only visited the most (to us) accessible - the beautiful [Hallepoort](#) that we gaze at from our windows every day. The museum inside is surprisingly interesting, I don't think it will be the last time we visit. What I love best is our connection to such a historic monument, the maps and models throughout the ages invariably show the spot where our apartment is now, letting us imagine how our home would have looked 700 years ago.

Our monument visiting in Brussels was then cut short by the desire to take part in the festivities in Namur. We wandered around a city packed full of



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festival goers, shopping stands and lots and lots of food. One square was filled with teenage pop singing, another with children's playgrounds, a third with eateries. We walked past the grand citadel of Namur and along the canals, but most of all we were there to see the famous Combat de l'Echasse d'Or!



The Fight for the Golden Stilt has been held in Namur each year since at least 1411. The battle is held between the Melans (with yellow and black stilts) and the Averesses (with red and white stilts). It is not just an ancient tradition, it is a serious sporting event, and the most riveting I have ever watched. The aim of the game is to knock the other person of their stilts by using your body and stilts, until one team is victorious.

The two teams, dressed in red and white, march into Place Saint-Aubain on their metre-high stilts. They do a lap of the square and then face off against each other, twenty per team. I had expected a fast rush, a bunch of knock-downs and it would all be over. It was nothing of the sort. At the start it seemed more like the formal dance of the Brolgas, two teams of storks parading in formation, weaving in and out and making a fabulous display through synchronisation. Then you start to see the pattern, and it isn't like storks at all, more like two packs of wild dogs, or a pride of lions stalking a herd of wildebeest. The weaving and ducking was all part of a strategy to peel off a weakling from the pack, where they can be surrounded and knocked down while outnumbered. There appeared to be blockers and attackers to isolate and defeat, and also defenders who were on the look-out and would run over on their stilts to back-up their team. The only exceptions were two young boys, one on each team, who were allowed to battle each other without interruption, the winner only being targeted in defence, an unwritten code of conduct.

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The typical attack was to balance on one stilt and then lash out at the opponent's with the other. Body slamming would be used to disorientate, but hands were always kept on the upper extension of the stilt – by rule of practical necessity I do not know. The duelers were most at risk when attacking, as they would be standing on a single stilt, so two or three walkers together tended to be safe. These attacks were lightning fast jabs, mostly exploratory and unsuccessful, although one dueler had his stilts swept out from underneath him so quickly that he hit the concrete floor head first and the paramedics rushed in to treat his concussion.

The other attack used was to lock stilts with another walker, like stags with locked horns you would see the unmoving battle of strength until they both retreated under threat of destabilisation or one walker managed to knock off the other. These bouts only lasted thirty seconds to a minute before the team defense flowed in.



For half an hour the battle continued with regular knock-downs, until only the best of the best were left, seven Melans (yellow and black) against five Averesses (red and white stilts). I had expected it to finish rapidly once there was a numerical discrepancy, but the agility and dexterity of the remaining competitors was astounding. One small older bald man on the Averesses side was remarkable in escaping attack, being knocked almost to the ground before sweeping his stilts out wide to gain footing and leaping out of the fray. He was only taken down when a Melan lunged bodily at him and intertwined their stilts, a one-for-one trade-off that greatly aided the Melan. Another Melan performed the stunning feat of having his stilt knocked off, then crouching low on one stilt to catch the falling stilt with his free foot, flicking it up to his hand and refitting it, all while being attacked on his other stilt.

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Finally, after fifty minutes it was down to 5:1, the Melan lead unbeatable. The final Averesses held on for another ten minutes before the Melan claimed victory. The Fight for the Golden Stilt had still not finished, however – the Melan turned on each other in a rough, yet cordial, melee, which resulted in the final man left standing pulling off one stilt and holding it high in the air in victory!

Summer is over, winter is approaching

7/10/09 Leuven

Every day is getting shorter, the glorious sun of summer and autumn is being replaced by bleak clouds and rain. The festivals are nearly over for the year and the nights of playing outside are already gone. The beautiful architecture of Belgium, rich detail in old stone, is now looking bleak and washed out in gray. It is time to start wearing jackets, carry around an umbrella and curl in against the weather.

On the plus side sunrises over Brussels now gloriously grace our breakfast table and we have hundreds of interesting museums to explore out of the way of the weather. Time to stay inside cooking lavish meals, drinking great beers with friends and protect our own little piece of summer against the weather outside.

Belgian sniffles

8/10/09 Leuven

It seems like half of Belgium is down with the flu, every workplace is understaffed and hence cranky. On the plus side, one of the most commonly used Dutch words in our house is "katnieszikte", ever since we read it on our kitten's vaccination card. We pronounce it like "catten-sneezy" as it is the Dutch word for Cat Flu and little Mint does get the sneezes. Today I learned that in Dutch a congested nose is "snotneus". The aetiology seems rather obvious.

The beautiful people

14/10/09 Leuven

An couple of articles in Flanders Today discuss the [latest research](#) in Leuven, as the University was ranked [number 65](#) in the world. What I loved was the introduction:

Be honest, the first thing that strikes you when you're in Leuven is just how many good-looking young people there are in town. Only then do you notice the gorgeous architecture. After that, it becomes quickly evident that Leuven is also crammed full of bars.

So true. Every visitor I've had in Leuven is struck with just how beautiful the people are here. Lydia tells me that the grace the girls of Leuven have comes from being brought up on cobblestones rather than concrete, which seems as good a theory as any.

Learning Flemish

20/10/09 Leuven

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Another Flemish lesson. I'm now taking private tutoring on top of the self-directed stuff.

On the up side, my reading is really improving. I've learned around 350 words, I don't remember them all but in context I usually manage to work out simple sentences. The verb structure is just so counter intuitive to an English speaker. Consider the verb "introduce" (voorstellen). If I (ik) want to introduce you (u) I don't write "Ik voorstellen u". No, instead I have to split the verb up, put the back bit first and then put you in the middle - "Ik stel u voor". It makes literal translation almost impossible, the half verbs have separate meanings (eg "voor" means "for"), so you have to know which words to join in which order before you can piece together the meaning. I am told that this is why people don't interrupt in German (which has the same issue) - you don't know what the person is talking about until they are finished.

On the down side, oral/verbal is just a bugger. The ability to hear novel phonemes drops after the age of five and is nearly dead by puberty. This means in practice that an adult hearing a new language will not be able to hear the difference between phonemes that don't exist in their language. And if you can't hear it, you can't say it. Think "r" and "l" with Japanese speakers learning English as an adult. For me a lot of the vowels are a problem - I struggle to hear the difference between Flemish "e", "i" and "ie". And then the Flemish "g" and "r"! I just have to use the brickwall phrase I hit too often in Belgium "it's impossible".

The United States of Europe

21/10/09 Brussels

I just read *"The United States of Europe"* by former Belgian PM Guy Verhofstadt. He makes a very thoughtful case about which areas the EU should form a united political body and override national bodies (finance, research, justice, foreign affairs and military affairs) and which areas the EU should completely remove itself from (eg cultural areas, education, health, etc). I find it a very convincing case, as he uses a rational basis for division - areas which require unified action need to be controlled by a unitary body, rather than negotiating every piece past the Czech President, likewise areas in which there is no advantage for unified action should not be controlled by a centralised body, letting the French name their cheeses whatever they like. I'm not entirely convinced that a European army is necessary or desirable, although it would make sense for internal EU countries (why does Switzerland have 224 tanks, and why does Luxembourg even maintain its 900 person army?) to support the protection of the border countries. If the rationale is to reduce the size of the military via efficient combination, that would be something I support. The rest of the argument seems sensible in both policy and PR - once it is made clear what areas the EU is boss and what areas the national government is boss it will be easier for the public to credit the EU with its enormous successes and also hold it accountable for its failures.

The one part of the thesis that I think is just down-right wrong is the basic premise, that "Europe is in a crisis". How so? Europe contains the richest countries in the world, the countries with the highest living standards in the world and the countries with the longest life-expectancy in the world. Europe has been at peace for longer than ever before in its history, and for the first time ever peace is the expected continuing condition. It is simply unthinkable for France to invade

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Germany or for Spain to enter civil war. Europeans have more freedom than ever before in history, travel networks and common currency make it a breeze to zip across old borders, the right to live and work across the EU gives every citizen continent-wide potential. The Human Rights Court and various EU treaties protect the rights of citizens even against their own government. Europe is working better than ever. Economic growth in Europe may be slower, but so is population growth, so the rich countries are keeping their good lifestyles intact and the poor countries have been catching up in leaps and bounds. With the global downturn over the last year we've also seen the advantage of the European economic model - the contraction was shorter and shallower than in the US, and the smaller number of additional unemployed were secured by the welfare net. I can understand Verhofstadt expressing frustration at the slow pace of change in Europe, with European maximal potential still in the distance, but Europe is not in a crisis.

Railways, Strikes and Grandmothers

7/11/09 Brussels

We had a railway strike in Belgium this week, the second this year. The first came about as train conductors demanded the right to close the door to the train before the train started moving, after a conductor was pulled out and ended up with his legs severed in a horrific accident. This second strike was spurred by management wanting "flexibility" aka, the ability to cut wages and cut jobs.

Do we value the railway staff enough? The 38000 staff carry over 200 million passengers and 60 million tons of freight over 10 billion kilometres a year. Each staff member on average generates 80 000 euro a year in income for the company (3 billion euro a year). One day without the rail and the country was crippled, costing business 5 million euros (indicating that the railways generate an additional 2 billion a year in productivity gains to other Belgian companies). And the social costs! Clogged highways, crowded buses, a million hours of leisure time must have been lost to commuting on this one day - what price do we put on that?

The rails have long been the most efficient way to move goods and people across Belgium. During WWII some of the most valuable intelligence on the Germany military came from old grandmothers, knitting on their balconies overlooking the railway tracks. For every troop carriage that went past they would drop one and for every artillery carriage they would pearl one. Without any soldiers getting suspicious they collated their data and passed it onto the resistance....

The shameful piece

12/11/09 Leuven

Eating the last slice of cake is so taboo in Flemish culture that the final piece is called "het schaamstukje". This literally translates to "the pubic piece", but more accurately refers to "the shameful piece".

The French influence in dessert is so strong that most Flemish use "dessert" (with French pronunciation) rather than the Flemish word "toetje" (strike that, it is Dutch, thanks Cedric). "Toetje" might better reflect the Flemish attitude to serving sizes, however, as the literal

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translation is something like "a small close (to the meal)".

Everyone who has ever watched "The Office" knows the feeling well, but unlike the English the Flemish have named it. "Plaatsvervangende schaamte" is the embarrassment you feel when watching someone else do something really embarrassing. It literally translates to something like "place-substitution shame".

I love Flemish

17/11/09 Leuven

... I really wish I could speak it. It is such a cute language.

From today's lesson, I learned that in Flemish a stuffed toy is called a "knuffel", which literally translates to "cuddle". As an aside, the Flemish always pronounce the "k" at the front, so "knie" (knee) is pronounced like it looks like it should be in English - keh-nee.

I already knew that a "kater" (cat) was a hang-over and a "blauw kater" (blue cat) was a really bad hang-over, today I learned that a small hang-over is called a "kattertje" (kitten). Oddly the cat in question is a male (kater) never a female (kat).

My "this is just silly" moment for the week comes from a sentence: "Er staan drie zitten kinderen op de photo". "Three sitting children stand on the photo". In Flemish things either stand, sit, lie or hang. It is all very difficult for French speakers to learn but is nearly identical to English, except that everything written or printed "stands". Your signature stands on the page, music stands on a CD, three sitting children stand on the photo.

Two Flemish sayings that I liked: "er hangt regen in de lucht" ("the rain hangs in the sky", for an overcast day) and "ik doe water in de wij" ("I put water in the wine", meaning to compromise or give in).

Finally, today I learned to origin of the most commonly used Flemish word (for me at least), "alstublieft". It is the same as "s'il vous plaît" in French, used as both "please" and "there you go", which explains why the most common English mistake in Belgium is waiters saying "please" when they give you something. Anyway, I hadn't picked up on this, but it is a contraction of "als het u bliest" ("if it pleases you"). I'm really happy to know this, because it used to irk me how bilingual signs would say "svp/aub" and I didn't know why they used a.u.b. as the acronym.

Belgian farming

19/11/09 Leuven

Things I didn't know about [Belgian farming](#):

- * 50% of land in Belgium is used for farming
- * 86,500 Belgians work in agriculture
- * Belgium is one of the world's major food exporters (10% of national exports)

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- * 70% of Belgian fruit and vegetables are exported
- * Belgium is the world's largest exporter of pears
- * In 2008 Belgium slaughtered 11.2 million pigs and 800,000 cows

Brussels as a Brusseleer

22/11/09 Leuven

I'm marking this weekend down as my first as a Brusseleer. Before living in Brussels, trips to the capital were purpose-driven, a day-trip to visit the [sights](#) or a recommended [restaurant](#). Then living in Brussels and weekends were either spent out of the capital on the endless exploration of Belgian [festivals](#), or back in Leuven on my futile grant-writing mission. This weekend marked my first in Brussels to just wander around and enjoy living in Brussels. Getting some frites with mayonnaise in a cone of butcher's paper. Wandering up Blaesstraat and poking my head into rabbit-warren antique shops. Sleeping in with kittens. Walking through the beautiful Sablon area and eating a hot waffle from a van. Wandering through picturesque parks hand in hand with my lovely bride, wearing a heavy coat against the cold. Sitting down to lunch at home with freshly baked bread and a novel beer. Living in Belgium is exhausting, it is lucky that being a Brusseleer is so relaxing.

My favourite Belgian beers

23/11/09 Leuven

Duvel. Duvel is probably the beer I drink the most, as it is the easiest found quality Belgian beer, and very affordable. It was the first strong blond to be brewed and is very easy to drink, so you only realise after your second or third Duvel that at 8.5% every glass has the same amount of alcohol as 2.5 shots of vodka.

Cantillon Gueuze Lambic. This is a beautiful beer made by a Brussels brewery that tastes more like a sour cider than like a hopsy beer. It is definitely a brewery in the traditional style, with open fermentation and old wood, the type Victor Hugo spoke of approvingly when he lived in Brussels ("It smells of dead mice; delightful!").

Hoegaarden. I know, this is a mass produced beer by the largest beer company in the world, but on a warm day I love the slightly citrus wheat flavour of a chilled Hoegaarden.

Floris Passion Fruit. My beer guide of Belgium specifically refuses to include this beer on the grounds that it isn't really a beer, it is an alcoholic wheat drink mixed with passion fruit syrup. That may be so, but it is delicious, probably the only beer that Lydia and I both like. It is just like drinking Passionata and it is so easy to drink litres and litres.

Kasteel Rouge. This is another fruit lambic, but very different from the light syrup lambics like Kriek. Instead the Kasteel Rouge is not overpoweringly sweet, with a rich deep cherry flavour more like a sweet dessert wine or a cherry liquor than a beer.

A Throne in Brussels

29/11/09 Brussels

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Paul Belien claims his book "A Throne in Brussels" is the only history of Belgium in the English language, which is about as accurate as the rest of the novel.

To set the scene, in Belien's Belgium, Flanders was one of the richest parts of Europe from the early middle ages up to 1830 (the Belgian revolution that led to the founding of the modern Belgian state), when the Belgian monarchy started a war of attrition against the Flemish that continues to today. He ignores the reality of a decline in the wealth of Flanders from the 13th century that accelerated after the beginning of the 80 years war in 1568, and the role of the Spanish occupation and Catholic Church in the economic stagnation. Belien continually pontificates on Belgium being not a real country but an artificial country, as if it is unique in borders being shaped by conquest, political alliance and deals between kings.

The "history" is still readable up until the 20th century, where it enters a delusional and confused rewriting of history. Belien ignores the peaceful Flemish nationalists and blatantly lies about the role of the extremist Flemish nationalists in collaborating with the Nazis. In his mind, Flanders was the only region of Europe that did not have a local fascist party to collaborate with the Nazis, and the VNV (by coincidence the precursors of his own party) were democratic-minded and anti-racist, only joining the Nazis for the good of Flanders. By contrast, the anti-democratic pro-racist pro-Belgian French speakers, who Belien sees as the natural collaborators of the Nazis, wanted to join but instead joined the resistance because they hated the Flemish that much. The VNV then managed in collaboration with the Nazis to save more Jews than any other organisation, and they themselves would have been sent to concentration camps except the Nazis were afraid of the Flemish uprising that would occur if they moved against the VNV.

You would think that the Nazi plan ended in 1945. Not so, Belien argues. Pro-Nazi King Leopold III, via his adviser Henri de Man who mentored Paul-Henri Spaak, managed to implement the King's Nazi-inspired plan for a pan-European dictatorship via founding the EU. Or maybe the EU is a conspiracy by French-speaking Belgians to keep Flanders subjugated, he is a little unclear on this point.

One thing Belien is very clear about, I should be very very scared about stepping foot outside my apartment. As part of a Francophone conspiracy the Belgian government has made massive numbers of French-speaking Islamic extremist terrorists Belgian citizens, to keep Brussels out of the hands of the Flemish forever. The extremist mosques now run Brussels and even have their own police force roaming the streets to enforce strict Islamic law. Oddly, I have never noticed any of them, despite living in one of the most immigrant-rich neighbourhoods in Belgium and no one seems to have told the young North African children in the park across the road from me that they are not mean to be playing games with the Flemish and Walloons.

As a history, "A Throne in Brussels" is worse than useless. But it is valuable as an insight into the mind of modern neo-fascist parties like Vlaams Belang, the British National Party and One Nation. I'm still not sure if he believes everything he wrote or if he has justified his deceptions as contributing to his cause. I am sure that the cordon sanitaire around Vlaams Belang needs to stay - Belien is intelligent enough to get enough fact in his book to distort the fictions. Vlaams Belang's pollution might become obvious after a term in office, but the racist hate they monger would cause enormous harm to real people. Out of power their victims are not just the

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immigrants and Francophones he preaches against, but also reasonable Flemish nationalists, a sour distaste left on their political stance by Vlaams Belang's claim to represent them.

Nuclear Belgium

1/12/09 Leuven

I had no idea, but Belgium is one of five countries that host US nuclear weapons on its territory (the other four are Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey). There are 20 nuclear bombs sitting in Kleine Brogel airbase, and Belgian airforce crews have been trained to deliver the nuclear payloads.

Belgium signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty which pledges "not to receive the transfer ... of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or of control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly" and the US pledged "... not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly". Apparently this is legally okay, since the US states that it won't officially transfer the nuclear weapons until nuclear war is declared, at which point the nuclear non-proliferation treaty becomes void. Completely violates the intent of the treaty, of course.

Cologne Christmas markets

12/12/09 Cologne

We had a wonderful weekend exploring the Christmas markets of Cologne and Aachen. Cologne is famous for its Christmas markets - it now has seven markets and two million visitors explore them every year. We spent the day shopping and grazing out way across the markets with Ellie. The first stop was the Cathedral Markets, under the soot encrusted towering peaks of the grand Dom. Hot chocolate and garlic bread fueled our walk to the Alter Markt, a themed market decorated with gnomes. It is so wonderful to see crowds of people mingling and enjoying being outside in the cold, warmed only by thick coats and mulled wine. Winter could be such a dour

time in Europe, instead there is laughter and joy. The cold keeps the ice skating rinks open and the dark just allows artificial stars to twinkle in the sky.

The next port of call were the Floating Markets, held on riverboats docked on the Rhine, where Lydia found a new scarf and gloves, including her latest toy the twinned glove for holding hands in the cold. The boat next to the markets was



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flying the Swiss flag, which made me wonder whether the boat owner was Swiss, or whether the Swiss flag was being used in solidarity for anti-Muslim intolerance. I wonder how the Swiss would feel about people attaching such a dual meaning to their flag? From the Floating Markets we ventured to the Medieval Christmas Market, where we drank Vikings Blood and played mouse roulette.

After Ellie had to return to Brussels we wandered through the markets a bit longer, and Lydia spoiled me rotten by buying me a new camera - the smooth and crystal clear Canon Eos 50. Hopefully the photos do the camera justice. We finished up the night with train to Aachen and a relaxing Sauna in our hotel room, the most relaxing end to a peaceful day.

Cologne Christmas markets

12/12/09 Cologne

We had a wonderful day exploring the Aachen Christmas Markets. To Lydia's joy, Aachen is Gingerbread City, with "Printen" (a biscuit like gingerbread originally imported from Dinant, but made sweeter and softer with recipes kept secret by every Aachen bakery) being sold everywhere and giant Gingerbread Men welcoming guests at the market gates. We sampled many different types of printen all day, bringing back a selection of our favourites, including the very last



Reindeer Printen which Lydia declared to be the best example of gingerbread art she has ever seen.

Apart from the markets, we also explored the Aachen Town Hall. The town hall was built on the ruins of Charlemagne's palace in 1350. At the time it was called one of the "greatest and boldest achievements in secular architecture" and became a model for Flemish town halls in Antwerp, Bruges and Ghent.

The art inside was quite interesting, my favourite was a painting of John Montagu (1718-1792), third Earl of Sandwich, who was in Aachen as an envoy to the end of the Austrian War of Succession in 1748 but is better known for inventing the sandwich.

Facing the Town Hall is the Aachen Cathedral, the oldest in northern Europe having been started by Charlemagne in 792. The history of the Cathedral is so important that it was one of the original 12 places to be listed by UNESCO as [world heritage sites](#), and one of only three in Europe (the other two were Krakow and the Wieliczka salt mines).

Finally, we visited the Couven Museum, a display of furniture and decor from the 18th and 19th century, including several rooms of very badly drawn Dutch tiles. To top everything off, the trains between Aachen and Brussels have just been upgraded from express to super-express, so it was only one hour from door to door.

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Nuts Day

17/12/09 Bastogne

Today is "Nuts Day" in Bastogne. On this day a young man interested in matrimony can offer his girl a bag of nuts; if she accepts the nuts they are betrothed and, according to custom, will marry within the next year.

A walk around Kortrijk

9/1/10 Kortrijk

One of the delights of Belgium is the beauty of small towns that I'd never heard of before moving here. It is safe to say that Kortrijk is well off the international travel route, but it stands up well against tourist hot-spots like Bruges. We were lucky enough to have our own [knowledgeable guide](#) to show us the highlights of the city - including a World Heritage-listed Beguinage and Belfry and the beautiful Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Church of Our Lady).



A highlight for me was seeing the Golden Spurs hanging from the chapel roof of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk. The Battle of the Golden Spurs was a famous battle between Flemish commoners and French knights on July 11th, 1302. Being lowly commoners, the Flemish didn't realise that after winning they were meant to only kill foot soldiers and ransom off the highborn knights, instead killing the lot and keeping the golden spurs of the knights as a symbol of their victory. It is still odd for me to see history over 700 years old in the form of golden spurs hanging from the ceiling of a building that watched it all go by, rather than as a story pieced together from myth and archeological evidence.

A weekend in Cambridge

24/1/10 Cambridge

We had a delightful weekend in Cambridge with good friends. Beer tasting at the Cambridge beer festival, long morning sleep-ins followed up by home-made crumpets, a wander through the



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colleges, a trip to London to see a musical (Avenue Q) and a walk through the English countryside to have a pub-meal at Coton. One of the most relaxing weekends we've had for a long time.

Like Disneyland, but cold and bilingual

13/2/10 Paris

With military precision Lydia planned our trip to Disneyland Paris. Down to extra fast-passes bought off eBay from a disgruntled Disneyland employee to toe warmers and charts of waiting times on various rides, we were set to go to the ice-encrusted amusement park.

We turned up at the gates at 8am, wrapped up against the cold and the only ones in the park. Walking down "Mainstreet USA" the shops were all closed and there wasn't another person in sight (a more accurate depiction of Mainstreet than in Disneyland LA?). We went on Space Mountain 2 again and again, without ever waiting in line. When the other rides opened we went on all of them too - never waiting more than 15 minutes. We visited Disney's Hollywood studios as well - the Tower of Terror is a classic and the Rock 'n' Roller Coaster was fantastic (higher G forces than a space shuttle launch).

Luckily we had young friends with us so that I could ride the fast rides while Lydia soaked up Disneyland "culture" (she proudly told me that Disneyland got the guy who had restored the stain glass windows of Notre Dame de Paris to come out of retirement to do the windows for Sleeping Beauty's Castle).



The rides were all the same (except not so old and shabby looking), but it was quite odd hearing Buzz Lightyear and others speak in French. Lydia and I were very amused that the English components of the parade had a strong Australian accent, even when the speaker would say a few English words ("Disneyland Paris") in the other languages.



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Spontaneous parades

21/2/10 Brussels

Nearly every weekend we'll hear some drums, brass instruments or the general noise of excitement and we know that there is another parade going on in Brussels. Sometimes we'll see the parade coming and we'll be able to work out what it was for, others remain a mystery forever.

A new Spring in Belgium?

1/4/10 Leuven

Catching the train yesterday from Brussels to Leuven I was watching the country side go past, full of light and colour, just about to burst into Spring. Unfortunately my mood shifted rather rapidly from admiration of Belgium to profound disappointment. Today I learn that Belgium is moving towards putting women in prison for the choice they make in clothing. That is the only way you can describe the ban on the burka.

"Wearing the burka in public is not compatible with an open, liberal, tolerant society", according to Daniel Bacquellaine. Yet putting women in prison for seven days for choosing to wear the burka **is** compatible with an open, liberal and tolerant society?

"The burka is contrary to the dignity of women. [It is a walking prison](#)", he claims without the slightest sense of irony - obviously preferring the women to be forced into the traditional style "bars and barbwire" prison. "[We have to free women of this burden](#)", from Corinne de Parmentier, trying to enforce a much harsher burden. I'm sorry, but this is just screwed up. Does he think that these women will now start wearing short-shorts? More likely they'll be forced into self-imposed imprisonment, unwilling to go out in public. How is that good for the women? I wish these stupid racist bastards would stop pretend they are looking out for the women they are persecuting. Pass some useful laws, like making it illegal for a man to force a woman to wear burka or pressure her into subservience. Cracking down on the fashion itself is just a moronic way of trying to hide the problem.

To those people who hide behind terrorism fears instead of pseudo-liberation poses, a burka hides no more than the winter coats worn by every Belgian. To those people who are just anti-Islam - look again. In Belgium [Catholics are more religious than Muslims](#), there are almost no burkas in sight (right now, next week I'd be willing to wear a burka in protest and I bet I'm not the only one) and the fanatics are the Flemish racial purists in Vlaams Belang. I think the burka is silly, but then I also think a lot of fashion is silly. I think some of the religious beliefs behind the Abrahamic religions [directly lead to repression of women](#) - but the best way around religion is secular education, not state prohibition. The very idea that the state is going to "protect" women by throwing them in jail for what they wear is like the state "protecting" gay men by criminalising their sexuality. I am just so angry that these people, on top of the power pyramid, are picking on those with the least power.